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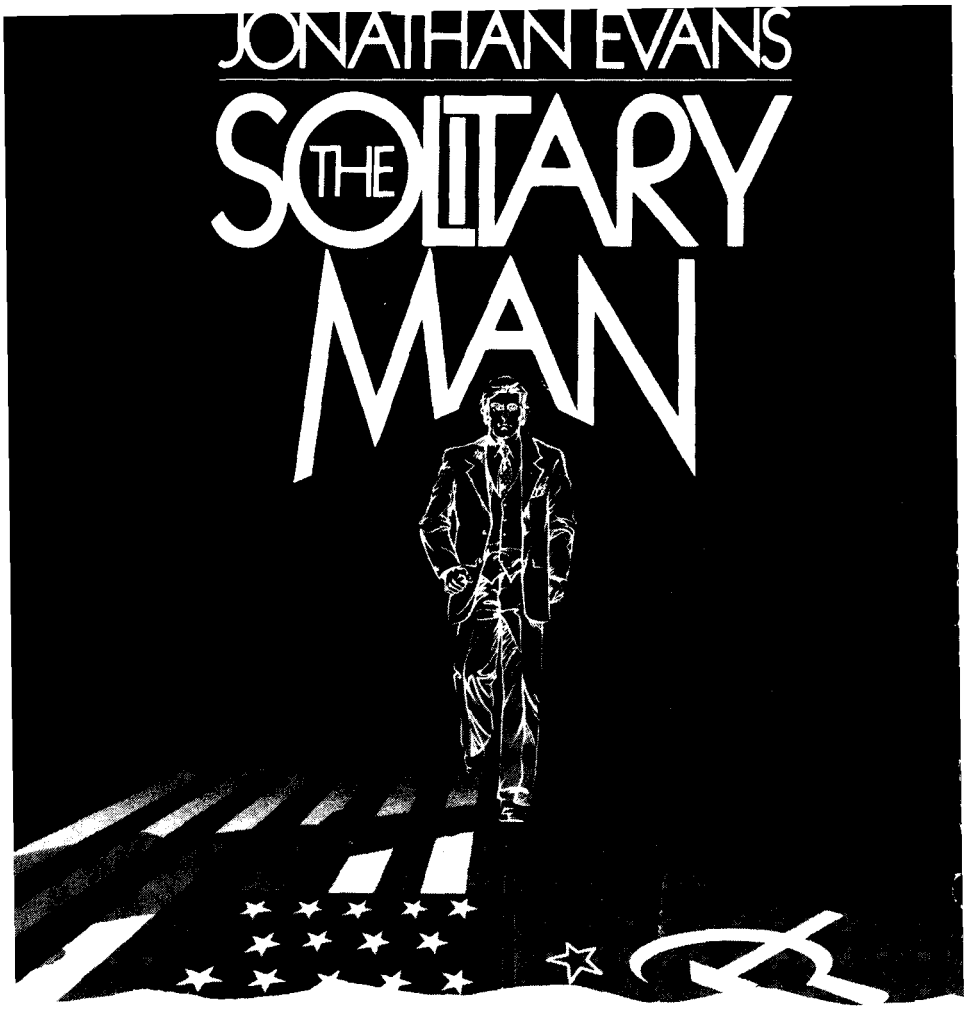

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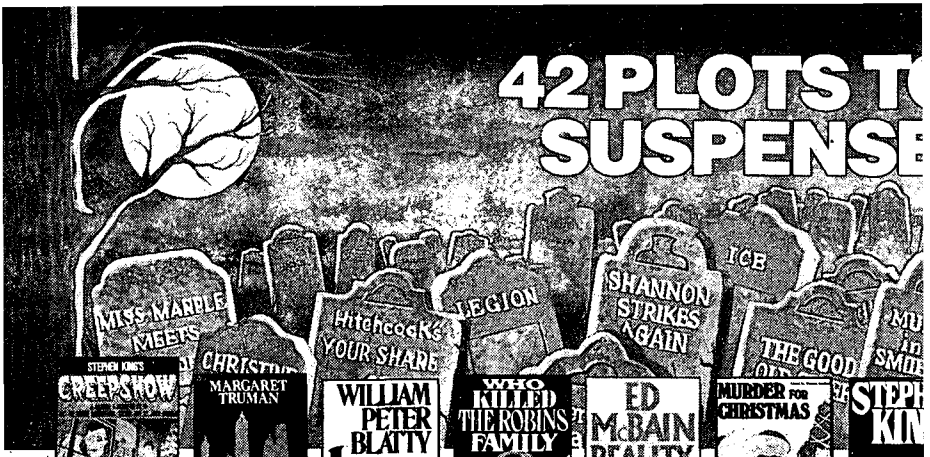

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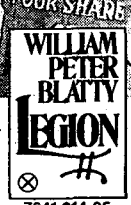

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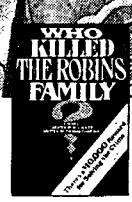

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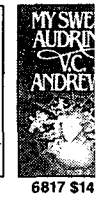

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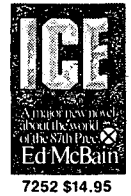

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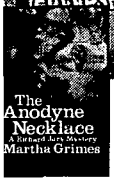

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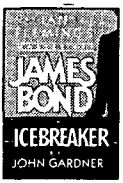

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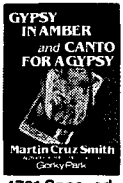

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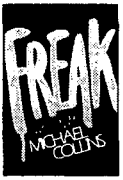

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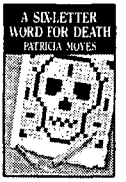

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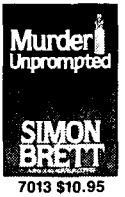

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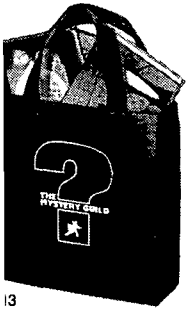

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IRENE, GOOD-NIGHT

by D. R. BENSEN

July 7, 1892

It was almost pathetic—but very definitely amusing—to see him at such a loss. He knew me, of course, and it was plain to see that he desperately hoped I did not know him—that the flaxen hair, the ruddy, windburned complexion, the subtle alterations of the planes of his face, and the bulkiness of his frame would confirm him in the identity he had chosen.

He ought to have known better. I have in my time persuaded audiences on two continents that I was an Egyptian princess, a consumptive Parisienne cocotte, a Spanish lady of good family, and an Irish queen, and am familiar with almost every means of disguising the human face and form. Dye, paint, padding, and something shoved up above the gums under the cheekbones would account

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for it all. But the nose, though reddened at the tip as if to suggest chronic frostbite, and the ears were as I recalled them, even though I had last seen him in an equally false guise, that of an old clergyman.

It was his bad luck that I was there at all. He could not have been expected to know that my husband Godfrey and I had settled in Paris, or that the Princesse de Dromer would that morning, having learned that Godfrey would be occupied with business engagements (if indeed he was!), have sent me a pneu bidding me to her informal reception for the Norwegian explorer Thaengl Sigerson.

When the Princesse brought him over to me for the introduction, he presented a convincing picture of the Arctic explorer. However, for an instant he appeared to be an extremely nervous Arctic explorer.

He recovered his poise quickly, and bent to kiss my hand, saying in a singsong voice, "Ensyantay, madame."

The Princesse was wandering away to see to her other guests. "I should feel more comfortable in English, M. Sigerson," I said. "With so many ties between your country and mine, I trust that you have a command of our language?"

"Oh, ja," he said. "I lyearn in skyool in Christiana, by Yove."

"Your travels have taken you to many places, M.Sigerson," I said. "The frozen wastes of the north in particular. Yet I wonder if you have ever thought that there can be much of interest for the adventurer—or even the adventuress—in the civilized, settled parts of the world."

"I don't t'ink you'd say that if you spend much time in Christiana, or even Tromso," he said. "But I'll admit, Paris is somet'ing nyew to me." His glances away from me were more frequent and almost urgent.

"You have missed much if you have not experienced a London fog," I said. "Or consider the Alps—as frigid at their peaks as the barren lands you have just returned from, yet far grander with their vistas and heights and the cataracts that descend from them. I am thinking particularly of the Falls of Reichenbach."

He was closer to me suddenly, with his face hidden from the others in the salon. "I thought you might be," he said in a low voice with no trace of the assumed accent. "You've rumbled me, then, Mrs. Norton. What do you propose to do about it?"

"About what, M. Sigerson? The only thing I have in mind is that it would be interesting to hear further of your adventures in a setting

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other than this. I find myself fatigued, and propose not to stay for supper, and should detest missing your doubtless fascinating account of your adventures. If you would be so good as to call at my apartments in the rue de Bretonvilliers on the Ile St. Louis—just across the Pont de Sully—tomorrow afternoon, I shall be very pleased. I must say, M. Sigerson, that I am not sure what you mean by 'rumbled'—is that some slang term used by flash coves and their morts?"

"By Heaven," he said in the same uncarrying, intense voice, "what I said to Watson was bang in the bull's-eye—you are *the* . . . No matter. Ja, Fru Norton—" he resumed the singsong accents of Sigerson "—*tusentak,* and I syall vait on yu at t'ree o'clock."

He bowed and turned away from me.

On the way home in the fiacre, I wondered—had he kept the photograph I had left in London four years ago? If he had, then he was in my hands.

I have not kept this journal since Godfrey and I removed to the Continent from England. For a while, I was too happy and busy; for a while after that, there was nothing that seemed worth the trouble to record; and lately I have dreaded to confide my thoughts to it.

I feel a feverish impulse to continue writing through the night . . . I wonder if Sigerson heard the last thing I murmured as he was led away—the only words I had ever said to him before this night, now repeated:

"Good-night, Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

July 8, 1892

Oh, Irene, where do you get off thinking your problems are so important? Here's a man whom the world thinks dead, who must cause the world to continue thinking so if he is to preserve his life, who miraculously survived mortal combat with the greatest criminal genius of the century—how can you bear to involve him in the petty concerns of one man and one woman?

Well, he did keep the photograph, so . . .

He has it, rather sadly creased, but with him in his self-imposed exile. "I took it with me for my encounter with Moriarty, Mrs. Norton," he told me this afternoon, after the concierge had admitted him and I had served him some proper Indian tea, almost impossible to get in Paris. "You were the only woman who had ever bested me, and I was about to meet the only man I considered capable of besting me, though in a far more final way. I don't know whether I regarded

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it as a talisman, or merely as a token of the not uneventful career I fancied I might soon be quitting."

He told me of the errors in the published accounts of his supposed death in May of last year in Switzerland, particularly the highly colored one by his old friend and associate—"Like the police, the good doctor will observe, deduce, and come up with the obvious answer. That it is obvious suffices for them; whether it is true is beyond their care or ken." He explained the reasons for his incognito—the need to guard against the malignancy of the surviving members of the criminal organization with whose head he was supposed to have perished in the Reichenbach Fall—and his alarm at my detection of it.

"And so you accepted my invitation," I said, "fearing that I would otherwise expose you?"

He shook his head, saying, "No, I should have come in any case. I take it that you have not asked me here in order to hear of my explorations—quite genuine, I assure you, and involving some remarkable discoveries concerning the anomalies associated with the magnetic pole, together with an unlooked-for appreciation of the sustaining qualities of whale-blubber."

"You are right," said I. "I have no need of a—consulting explorer. But the talents which you used so cleverly on behalf of a client who felt himself threatened by me, four years ago, can be of the greatest use to me now, and I am presuming to call on them now."

His eyes, normally veiled by drooping lids, gleamed. "Anything I can do—" he said.

"I fear that my husband, Mr. Godfrey Norton—" I said. "Well, it amounts to—" I sipped from my teacup and looked at the carved moldings, swags, and cupids on the ceiling. "As you know, Mr. Holmes, my husband and I left England shortly after our last encounter, and you know the reasons as well. We came to Paris, where my husband discovered that there was a good deal of legal work to be done for the English business community here, and in consultations for French firms dealing with England, and we determined to settle here. London was never much to my taste, and Paris, with the fever of preparations already in progress for the Exposition of the next year, was headily exciting. My husband prospered in his work, and, what is more important, relished it; I renewed old friendships, and was pleased to find that my operatic career, though never outstanding, was still remembered, and well thought of by some.

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We were happy, I at least happier than I had ever been; and so, I am sure, was he."

I paused.

"And?" he said.

"And then lately, Mr. Holmes, within this past week, his behavior has changed, and changed markedly. He is secretive, withdrawn. He is out at strange hours, far into the night. When I have telephoned his office at times he is customarily there, he is not there—and his clerk is evasive in his manner to me."

"And that is the sum of the matter?" he said.

"There are . . . other indications," I said. "It is at least a week since—"

"I quite understand," he said hastily, clearly not wanting any domestic revelations. "So you wish me—"

"To follow him, to see where he goes, whom he meets, and what he does."

"Quite so," he said uncomfortably. "Well, well, now that I am committed, I had best get at it. At the least, it will afford me some welcome changes of costume; I can hardly shadow the man in the person of a well known explorer and obvious foreigner. Where do you suggest I commence my observations?"

"We dine tonight at Foyot's with a guest from England," I said. "My husband has told me that he must be off on business immediately afterwards. I wish you to follow him and determine what that business is. He will be the tall, dark man of about your age with me." I rose. "I will get you a photograph to make your identification certain."

He also rose. "There is no need of that. I know Mr. Godfrey Norton by sight, and have in fact once assisted him on a matter of some importance to him."

I was surprised. "He has never mentioned it to me."

Holmes seemed quietly amused. "Ah, then perhaps he was not aware of it. Good day to you."

After he left, I was briefly uneasy. After all, I had secured his services to solve a mystery, not to have him present me with another one, however small.

July 9, 1892

We dined tonight at Foyot's. As usual, the food was excellent, but I did not enjoy it—I was too tense, knowing that within a short time Sherlock Holmes would be, at my instance, pursuing the man I

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loved. I felt shame at my suspicions of him, yet they must be laid to rest or confirmed. However, if what I most feared was so, the shame was his; and if it was not, he would never know, so there was no point in fretting over it.

Our guest noticed no strain; it seems to me that he never does, so long as he is doing most of the talking in a group, as he was tonight. "You and the lovely Irene have done the right thing, my dear boy," he said. "I myself nearly decided to do the same a few weeks ago—indeed, to go further and fare better, by renouncing the Crown and all its works and becoming a citizen of *La République*. Once the Lord Chancellor banned *Salomé* as showing disrespect for Biblical personages—*charming* of him to come to the defense of Herod, Herodias, and Salomé, don't you think?—it seemed the only way. Rather than live in a nation of Tartuffes, I was determined to share the homeland of his creator."

"You said 'nearly,' Oscar," Godfrey said, looking at him with an air of indulgent amusement.

"Well, after all," Oscar said, "there *is* that business of compulsory military service for anyone who becomes a citizen. And I'm not as fit as I was when you and I were up at Magdalen, and above all, *poilu* blue is just *not* my color! At any rate, the English aren't all bad—enough of them have good taste so that *Lady Windermere's Fan* is still having quite a nice and profitable run. Hence my presence in *La Ville Lumière* and my forthcoming trip to Homburg for the waters. I suppose I could never have become a republican, after all; I have too great a fondness for royalties."

Godfrey laughed, and I smiled briefly. Wilde has been here for some days, and we have dined together three times now, and we took him to see La Goulue and Jane Avril at the Moulin Rouge. They were never on close terms in London, so far as I know, but Wilde seems to have taken a fancy to resume an old college friendship. He is certainly amusing, and has, when he chooses to exercise it, a certain charm, but I do not care for him. He is Godfrey's age (and Sherlock Holmes's, too—odd thought), but appears considerably older, corpulent, and sagging. Godfrey, though not far short of forty, is still trim, vital, and vigorous (in every way—at least until quite recently), and I have noticed Wilde's eyes regarding him with what I take to be envy.

When the meal was concluded, we made our way to the street. "I'm off, my dear, as I told you," Godfrey said. "I'll drop Oscar on my way after I've put you into a fiacre."

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He handed me into a waiting cab, then, with Wilde, entered the next in the rank. I did not see Sherlock Holmes anywhere, and can only hope that he was near enough to follow.

I am new to journal-keeping, and find it helps me set my thoughts in order and arrive at some unexpected understanding of myself and my life. I should like to set down something of what events brought me to where I now am, but I am too tired for that now. In the morning, then.

It is past one in the morning now, and Godfrey is not here. I shall expect to learn where he has been tomorrow from Sherlock Holmes.

July 10, 1892

I became, at the age of twenty-five, mistress of Wilhelm Sigismond Gottareich von Ormstein, Crown Prince of Bohemia—of it all. The beginning was in Hoboken, in New Jersey, a town just across the river from New York City, a few minutes on the ferry. My father encouraged me to take it often from about when I was twelve, saying that it would do me good to see the life of a great metropolis. "You see how things go in New York, Ireneleh, and you'll know how they work in the rest of the world." He was a tall, dark, sardonic man with a prominent, aquiline nose (not unlike Godfrey in general appearance, I now realize—or Sherlock Holmes).

Emigrating to America in 1848, he established himself as a cobbler, married, and became a father and a widower in rapid succession. I recall little of my childhood. One night when I was, I think, five, I remember peering through the window of our apartment over the shop across the river to a lurid glow in Manhattan, fires set by the draft rioters, I was later told; and I was old enough, a couple of years later, to celebrate the end of the War, which seemed to have been going on for as long as I could remember.

But when I began making regular excursions into New York, sometimes with friends, more often, as I grew older, on my own, my life seemed to begin in earnest—and in joy as well. I don't recall how I came to visit the Academy of Music on 14th Street, the old opera house that I shall always prefer to the garish new Metropolitan, but once there, I was lost, or found, depending on how you look at it. They were doing *Traviata,* and from the moment I heard Violetta—I am almost sure it was Patti—sing *"Libiamo ne' lieti calici,"* I vowed that I too would "drink from life's o'erfloing winecup" as the printed libretto I held put it.

And I suppose I have. What's more I've done it as Violetta, and

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from that very stage—and as Lucia, Elvira, Aida, Leonora, and so many others, there, and at Covent Garden, the Opera, LaScala, Brussels, and, for better and worse, Warsaw, where . . . back to that later.

New York twenty years ago was in some ways wilder than Paris is now. Paris has its scandals and its prostitutes and its duels and its odder vices, but New York had them all.

At sixteen I became a part-time member of an opera company. Not at the prestigious Academy of Music but with a group that played the smaller theaters in the city and in the outlying villages of Brooklyn, Queens, and The Bronx. Ability and luck got me finally to a company performing at the Academy; the reviews were good; there were other engagements in Boston and Philadephia; then a call to come to Covent Garden as Leonora in *Trovatore* . . . and then the rest of the itinerary I mentioned before.

When I took an engagement in Warsaw in '83, I had, in common with the general run of actresses and female singers, a reputation for being no better than I should be, and a feeling that I rather enjoyed it. I am sure that when Wilhelm, etc. Crown Prince of Bohemia, saw me there, he figured that I would be an easy catch and a pleasant diversion. He was an amazingly handsome man of about my own age, tall, blond, the sort of man who should do Siegfried or Parsifal.

When he came backstage to see me, I was in a flash wholly in love with him, right from the wig I was unpinning to the toes of my slippers. But I wasn't the pigeon he was hoping for, and my unexpected resistance surprised, then fascinated him. He prolonged his stay in Warsaw to keep up his pursuit; then the pursuit turned to courting, and his arrogance melted into what seemed to me to be genuine feeling. I felt elevated by my decision not to succumb too soon. We were, in short, more nearly on a level, but soon enough, we were, as the wits have it here in Paris, horizontal.

In some ways, it was the best of that kind of experience I have ever had. (Mem.: Burn this journal when completed, or at least hide it *very* securely.) Wilhelm had, after all, enjoyed the favors of whatever women he had fancied for the last ten years—those not seduced by his person or name had succumbed to his purse—and knew better than I did what would most strongly affect me. I was, if not reborn, at least significantly changed by the experience; and it seemed to me that, in those early days, Wilhelm was, too. It was like living

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an opera—the doomed love of royalty and commoner. Well, it was doomed anyway.

He had had what he wanted, and he is not a man to want too many helpings of any dish. On a night when I expected him, he was instead with a ballerina from St. Petersburg; there was a final break; and we both left a city and a relationship we were glad to be rid of by then.

From Warsaw, I returned to New York, and found to my surprise that some investments I had made out of my modest savings I had accumulated—in the Edison system of lighting, and in the Bell telephones—had made me a woman of means, comfortable if not wealthy. I had no trouble getting an engagement as Carmen; but—it came to me during the "Habanera" as I was singing, *"Si je t'aime, prends garde a toi,"* which forcefully reminded me of my Prince—I realized that I had done with all this. I had fulfilled all the ambitions of a lower-middle-class Jewish girl from Hoboken by becoming an opera star with an international reputation, and the lover of a future king—and that I was not loved! With my father dead, and managers no longer having any function, I was for the first time in my life my own woman, with no obligations or calls upon me. And, for the first time, I had to examine how I would choose to live my life rather than respond to the requirements others imposed on me.

For someone of that cast of mind, there is one city in the world in which to reside. So, in the autumn of 1884, I took up residence in Serpentine Avenue in St. John's Wood, in London.

I suppose that my neighbors might have considered me a recluse, for I did not attempt to get on any social footing with them; yet I was out and about in the great city a good deal, on my own terms—which sometimes included assuming the less constricting and more rational clothing of the opposite sex (for which, after all, there is good operatic precedent) for excursions to the less quiet portions of Town.

I flatter myself that I made a convincing lad, being of slight build and, from the habit of wearing wigs onstage, keeping my hair cropped short. Perhaps too convincing, I thought, the night I was lounging around Covent Garden and some bona fide Cockney youths decided I was an alien element and thought to have some rather rough fun with me. They were driven off by a tall, hawk-nosed man with an impressive moustache, dressed in evening clothes.

"You'd best come away from here with me, my boy," he said, and whistled up a four-wheeler. When we were both in and the cab was

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moving, he said, after a glance at my clothing, "Except you live a bit east of here, eh? Be glad to see you home if it's not too far."

"It is, a bit," I said. "St. John's Wood." I had not bothered to disguise my voice, and I saw his head turn suddenly toward me.

I never knew Godfrey Norton's destination that night, but by the time we reached Briony Lodge it was no longer a matter of importance to him or to me. Our conversation had established who we were—he a rising lawyer, I a retired opera singer—that he had seen me perform at Covent Garden years before, something of our pasts (mine rather edited, but then so, probably, was his), and, without anything definite being said, where he would spend the remainder of his evening.

It is curious that I was hardly conscious of any clearly understood emotion at the time—certainly no thunderclap as I had felt with Wilhelm—only of what would happen, and that I was well content that it should happen.

Those first weeks have dreamlike quality now—no, they had it then. There seemed to be little to be decided; we went here, we went there; we did this, we did that (especially that—I really *will* burn this journal); we became almost effortlessly aware of each other's full selves (at least so I thought).

There was something un-English about Godfrey (which I mean in all praise), and he appeared to relish those aspects of his work that took him to the Continent. It was during an absence of his that I saw in the *Times* the announcement of the betrothal of Wilhelm, now King of his vest-pocket country, to Clotilde, second daughter of the King of Scandinavia.

The news tickled my fancy, King Wilhelm and Queen Clotilde —names for a pair of painted and gilded dolls. After five years, there was nothing left in me, for good or ill, of the feeling we had once had. Well, that is clearly not true; there was something left, but it was only the lees of malice, the feeling that I owed him a few moments of uneasiness. I had long since destroyed a certain photograph he had had taken of us together, but he would have no way of knowing that—the idea that it might come to the light would be a nightmare to him. I penned a note and sent it to the London hotel the newspapers had said he was staying at, reminding him of the photograph's existence and suggesting that it would interest the public strangely, in view of his forthcoming marriage.

Within ten days, there were two forced entries into Briony Lodge! I was accosted and robbed in the streets twice, and, on a brief visit

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to Brighton, my portmanteau vanished. There is crime aplenty in and around London, but five attempts on one person in twice as many days was beyond the bounds of normality.

"Well, it's him, of course, Irene," Godfrey told me upon his return from abroad. "There he is at the Langham, sending out his thugs to get back this blasted photograph that doesn't even exist any more, more's the pity. Well, things can't go on this way—we'd best do a moonlight flit and get out of this fellow's reach. I'll call in a favor or so and get a special license, and we'll get married at St. Monica's in the Edgeware Road tomorrow noon and hare off for Paris as soon as we can after."

"We'll get *what?*" I asked.

"Well, married. You never doubted that, I hope?"

And I realized that I had not.

The ceremony was a hasty one, made possible only by a witness that Godfrey had dragged in from the street. We parted, having agreed that I should, in view of Wilhelm's persecution, follow my normal routine and take my usual afternoon drive in the Park, returning to Briony Lodge at seven that evening—he would then come to me, and we would complete our preparations for our planned flight to France.

I did as we had agreed; but upon my return, there was a brawl in the street, resulting in an injury to an old clergyman, whom I directed to be brought in the drawing-room for rest and, if needed, treatment. When a cry of "Fire!" came, and clouds of smoke came into the room, I glanced instinctively at the hiding-place, just above the right bell-pull, where I had secreted the document that had made me Mrs. Godfrey Norton seven hours ago, went to it, and half-withdrew it. Then the old man cried out that it had all been a false alarm and absented himself, quite suddenly recovered from his injuries.

By then, of course, it was clear enough to me what had happened and with whom I was dealing. Having exhausted the resources of London's criminal classes, what more natural than that the King should have turned to Mr. Sherlock Holmes? I slipped into the male clothing in which I had first met Godfrey, took a cab to the well known address in Baker Street, and satisfied myself that my "clergyman" had been indeed the celebrated detective.

I had to admit that he had worked the thing well, though operating on a false premise. The photograph of a false lover, even had it still existed, would not have merited concealment in the safest place in my house; but the piece of paper that united me with Godfrey did.

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I was incautious enough, or perhaps confident enough in my disguise, to give him the taunt of a friendly good-night greeting as I passed him by in the street.

In the morning, Godfrey and I were on our way to Paris, leaving nothing for Holmes and Wilhelm but a letter explaining that the King and his Clotilde were safe from the consequences of his past perfidy—and a souvenir in the form of a photograph of myself (Irene only, no Crown Princess this time!). There was nothing further heard of the matter after Godfrey and I settled in Paris—except that I learned, very indirectly and some time later, that Holmes had refused any fee from Wilhelm except the photograph.

Thus it was that, when I saw "M. Sigerson" at the Princesse's two days ago, that I suddenly realized that I had a lever to get the help I needed.

I wonder if . . . there is the front-door ring, and Lucille going to answer it. That will be Holmes with his report.

Later

He was once again in his character of Sigerson, though he had been in a different costume last night—had in fact been the driver of the fiacre which Godfrey had entered with Oscar after seeing me into mine.

"I drove Mr. Norton," he said, in what seemed to me rather wooden tones, "and a male companion whom he addressed as Oscar—"

"That is Mr. Oscar Wilde," said I, "who is at the moment the most famous playwright in England."

"Indeed," said Holmes, "I don't follow the theater that closely; music has always been my passion. I drove Mr. Norton and Mr. Wilde, then, to the Hotel des Sts.-Pères in the street of the same name. They entered it, and I waited. After half an hour, Mr. Norton emerged and, without signifying that I was the driver who had dealt with him before, I took him to the destination he requested, in rue M. le Prince. It was . . . I regret to say, Mrs. Norton, that the numberplate on the door was unusually large."

I knew what he meant, and saw the cause of his embarrassment. The convention in Paris is for *maisons de convenance,* or what are in Hoboken called "hoorhouses," to have larger-than-ordinary numerals set in their doors.

"It would appear," Holmes said uneasily, "that my investigations have, unhappily, confirmed what you—"

"What number was it?" I asked.

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He told me and I laughed. "That's Mme. Epinard's—she's funneled the profits from her place into a restaurant in London, and my husband is always being called in to see that they're not cheating her. How long was he there?"

"A little more than a quarter of an hour," Holmes said.

"Then it was business, not pleasure. Godfrey would never—"

"Quite," Holmes said quickly. "Well, then, I am glad to take it that the outcome is not yet shown to be what you have feared. Is it your wish that I continue observing Mr. Norton's movements?"

I told him that it was, and that Godfrey had informed me that he would be, for once, at home this evening, but would be leaving at the unheard-of hour of six in the morning. Holmes agreed to be in place outside the house at that time.

There is no doubt that Mr. Holmes is a chivalrous and astute man—yet I wonder if he is fully qualified for this investigation. No matter; if he will bring me the facts, I shall know what to do with them.

July 11, 1892

"It would not have done," Holmes said, "to attempt to pass myself off as a fiacre-driver once again, so I assumed the guise of a district messenger on a bicycle. I was thus able to follow unobserved the fiacre which Mr. Norton took this morning. Its first stop was the Hotel des Sts.-Pères once again."

"How long did he stay?" I asked. We were once more in the drawing-room, though it was a little later in the day than had been his previous visit.

"No time at all; he sent his driver inside, and, after the space of some moments, the driver returned with Mr. Oscar Wilde, who joined Mr. Norton in the fiacre. They then proceeded, with me following discreetly, to the Bois de Vincennes."

"And what did they there?"

"They came up to a group of men already present in an open field, four in all, with two carriages waiting off to one side. I concealed myself and my machine in a clump of trees and observed them as best I could. Two of the men were in their shirtsleeves, and Mr. Norton spoke to one of these for some moments; another man did similarly to the other. As the fourth man of the group present at our arrival had a bag not unlike my esteemed colleague Watson's at his feet, it was no great feat to deduce that I was witnessing the

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preparations for a duel, in which Mr. Norton was acting as second for one party."

"Oh, Lord!" I said. "That will be the meeting between the journalist Batrinade and the artist Lebrume. It has been talked of, and Batrinade is a friend of my husband's—it could only be that! I wonder that the wretch—that my husband didn't tell me of it." It was another evidence that the free and open communication that had been such a part of our marriage was drying up. "In any case, since you have had a box seat, so to speak, for what all of Paris has been agog over, do tell me the outcome. I presume no one was killed, as you would probably have given me that information earlier in our conversation."

"No," Holmes said with some distaste. "The two gentlemen were provided with pistols, moved some paces apart, and stood facing each other. Before the word to fire could be given, one of them—" he paused, apparently searching for the best form of words "—became unwell."

I burst out laughing. "That would be Lebrume—he has always had a weak stomach. And then—?"

"The other party, apparently affected by the spectacle, followed suit. The doctor and the seconds assisted in cleaning the shoes of the duelists, which were the only part of their costumes affected, as they had had the good sense to lean forward. From fragments of conversation that drifted to me, I was able to gather that all agreed that honor had been satisfied, even though no blood had been shed. I was unable to hear all that was said, as Mr. Wilde had collapsed to the ground and was guffawing quite loudly."

"It is certainly a novel choice of weapons," I said, refraining with difficulty from following Oscar's example. "And then?"

"All returned to their carriages and were driven off. I followed that containing Mr. Norton and Mr. Wilde to a restaurant near Les Halles, where they breakfasted. Mr. Norton then returned Mr. Wilde to his hotel and took the fiacre on to the address in rue Scribe which you gave me as that of his offices." Holmes consulted his watch. "It is now ten o'clock. I shall resume my observation of Mr. Norton's offices at shortly before noon, and see where he goes for luncheon, as well as any excursions during the afternoon and evening."

He looked at me keenly. "I trust that what I have so far reported has served to ease your mind, if only negatively," he said. "It is true that he has been absent from you a good deal, but there is nothing culpable in his activities."

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"It may be so, Mr. Holmes," I said. But I am not so sure . . .

July 12, 1892

Last night, Godfrey was again away. I have learned not to keep awake for his return, but it could not have been much before dawn. We spoke little at breakfast, but it was clear that he had had little sleep. He told me, not meeting my eyes, that he would not be home for supper. I spent the day wondering where he had been last night, and where he would be tonight—the ugly answer that came to my mind, and the intolerable pictures of what that answer entailed were nightmarishly vivid to me all through the day.

At seven, Holmes came to me with his report, entering the drawing-room with a grave expression, which yet had something of the exultant mingled with it.

"I am sorry to say that I have confirmation of what you have feared," he said. "If you will permit it, I should prefer to set matters out in the order in which they occurred."

I nodded, feeling dread well up in me.

"Mr. Norton remained in his offices until past six," Holmes said. "He then went to the Hotel des Sts.-Pères, where he was joined by Mr. Wilde. They were driven to the Montmatre district, where they ate on the *terrasse* of a *brasserie*. During the meal, they appeared to be having a not altogether tranquil discussion."

"Concerning what?" I asked.

"I was unable, in my character of a street beggar, to get close enough to them to overhear. They then walked some few streets over, and entered the Moulin Rouge. With a little rearrangement of my costume, and the production of some few francs, I was able to assume enough of an air of respectability to enter the establishment. Mr. Norton and Mr. Wilde appeared to be absorbed in the entertainment, which chiefly consisted of a woman dancing in an abandoned manner with a very sparely built man with a remarkable capacity for improbable contortions."

"LaGoulue and Valentin le Désossé," I said. "And?"

"After watching the performance, Mr. Norton and Mr. Wilde repaired to a café across the street, again choosing the *terrasse*. I was able to find a seat near enough to them to ascertain the drift of their conversation. Mr. Wilde was importuning Mr. Norton—"

"Was he, indeed?"

"—on a matter of business. As far as I could gather, Mr. Wilde has for some days been asking Mr. Norton to act for him in the

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matter of some literary property he feels has been improperly handled. Mr. Norton said that he had looked into it, and that there was nothing that could be done. Mr. Wilde then left, apparently in something of a huff." Holmes paused and sighed. "What is to come must distress you, I fear," he said, "but you have chosen to set me on the trail, and must deal with what I have brought you. Unless, of course, you would prefer me not to speak?"

"No, Mr. Holmes," I said. "It is better to know everything—though I have the feeling that you have already given me an idea of whether my apprehensions have been justified." And so he had.

"Very well," Holmes said. Again, his tone was somber but had a note of triumph underneath it. "Mr. Norton took a cab to an address in the rue Georges Bizet which I have this morning found out to be that of—"

"La Belle Otéro!" I said.

He looked at me sharply. "You suspected this?"

"Not at all," I said. "But there's no one a man would call on at night in that street except her."

"It is, indeed," he said, "the residence of one Caroline Otéro. Inquiry in the neighborhood revealed that—"

"She's what's called here a *grande horizontale,*" I said. "A dancer at the Folies-Bergères, but lives mainly off men. And very rich men at that."

"Mr. Norton entered her residence at about half past eleven. He emerged from it at three in the morning. In case you were wondering if he were advising Miss Otéro on business matters," Holmes added with a touch of asperity, "I must tell you that his collar was disarranged and that he appeared to have only one sock on."

"That does appear conclusive, Mr. Holmes," I said. "And today?"

"I followed him from here this morning," he said, "and, though there was nothing out-of-the-way about his movements during the day, he went at five o'clock to the same address in the rue Georges Bizet. I left him there, but I dare say that if I were to return later on, I should achieve a repetition of the result I had in the small hours today."

"I imagine you would."

"Well, then," he said after a moment, "it appears that my work for you is done. Or perhaps it is not. It is a strange thing that I was present at the beginning of your marriage—and here for the end of it."

"What do you mean?"

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"That hasty ceremony at St. Monica's four years ago—do you recall that at the last moment a witness was required? *I* was that witness, pulled in by Mr. Norton from the street outside the church, where I had followed him in a pursuit of my inquiries. Well, well, it is strange how things turn out. Now I am, as far as all but you in the world know, dead; and you face a betrayal that is in itself a kind of death. It seems that we are in something of the same boat, eh?" He looked at me intently, and absently hummed a tune almost inaudibly.

After a moment, I recognized it as the final duet from Traviata, "*Parigi, o care, noi lasceremo*"—my love, let us leave Paris behind us. Oh, dear.

"Mr. Holmes," I said, "you mistake my situation. I have indeed been grievously treated by my husband—" Not nearly as much as I had feared, though!—"but he remains my husband. I have made my choice and I shall abide by it. I am grateful for your concern, and for your efforts in my behalf . . . and I shall always consider you a true friend."

He sighed, then rose from his seat. "Well, then, it only remains for Herr Sigerson to take his leave. In fact, I think the Scandinavian explorer has about come to the full term of his existence; I have a fancy to do some research in Montpellier, and shall need another identity there."

He stepped toward me, then halted. For the third time, I used the words I had first spoken to him: "Good-night, Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

He said, very softly, "Irene, good-night . . . " then left the room.

From him, I suppose that was the equivalent of a passionate embrace.

Alone, I relaxed on the sofa and hugged myself with glee. LaBelle Otéro! I have seen the savagery of her dancing, know her reputation—it's understandable that Godfrey would be drawn to her, and something of a credit to him that she would accept him, even temporarily. For it will be temporary, that I know—Otéro's lovers are not long-lasting.

So much, then, for fancies I entertained: the coincidence of the arrival of the old school friend and Godfrey's strange behavior; the recollection of our first encounter, with myself disguised as a boy; the visits to the Hotel des Sts.-Pères . . .

Irene Adler Norton, of Hoboken and points east, can compete with any woman, from La Belle Otéro on, and enjoy the contest.

But I could not have borne to face Oscar Wilde as a rival.

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THE WONDERFUL DEATH OF DUDLEY STONE

by RAY BRADBURY

"Alive!"

"Dead!"

"Alive in New England, damn it."

"Died twenty years ago!"

"Pass the hat, I'll go myself and bring back his head!"

That's how the talk went that night. A stranger set it off with his mouthings about Dudley Stone dead. Alive! we cried. And shouldn't we know? Weren't we the last frail remnants of those who had burnt incense and read his books by the light of blazing intellectual votives in the Twenties?

The Dudley Stone. That magnificent stylist, that proudest of literary lions. Surely you recall the head-pounding, the cliff-jumping,

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the whistlings of doom that followed on his writing his publishers this note:

> Sirs: Today, aged 30, I retire from the field, renounce writing, burn all my effects, toss my latest manuscript on the dump, cry hail and fare thee well. Yrs., affect.
>
> Dudley Stone

Earthquakes and avalanches, in that order.

"Why?" we asked ourselves, meeting down the years.

In fine soap-opera fashion we debated if it was women caused him to hurl his literary future away. Was it the Bottle? Or Horses that outran him and stopped a fine pacer in his prime?

We freely admitted to one and all that were Stone writing now, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck would be buried in his lava. All the sadder that Stone, on the brink of his greatest work, turned one day and went off to live in a town we shall call Obscurity by the sea best named The Past.

"Why?"

That question forever lived with those of us who had seen the glints of genius in his piebald works.

One night a few weeks ago, musing off the erosion of the years, finding each other's faces somewhat more pouched and our hairs more conspicuously in absence, we became enraged over the typical citizen's ignorance of Dudley Stone.

At least, we mutter, Thomas Wolfe had had a full measure of success before he seized his nose and jumped off the rim of Eternity. At least the critics gathered to stare after his plunge into darkness as after a meteor that made much fire in its passing. But who now remembered Dudley Stone, his coteries, his frenzied followers of the Twenties?

"Pass the hat," I said. "I'll travel three hundred miles, grab Dudley Stone by the pants, and say: 'Look here, Mr. Stone, why did you let us down so badly? Why haven't you written a book in twenty-five years?' "

The hat was lined with cash; I sent a telegram and took a train.

I do not know what I expected. Perhaps to find a doddering and frail praying mantis, whisping about the station, blown by seawinds, a chalk-white ghost who would husk at me with the voices of grass and reeds blown in the night. I clenched my knees in agony as my train chuffed into the station. I let myself down into a lonely coun-

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tryside a mile from the sea, like a man foolishly insane, wondering why I had come so far.

On a bulletin board in front of the boarded-up ticket office I found a cluster of announcements, inches thick, pasted and nailed one upon another for uncountable years. Leafing under, peeling away anthropological layers of printed tissue I found what I wanted. Dudley Stone for alderman, Dudley Stone for sheriff, Dudley Stone for mayor! On up through the years, his photograph, bleached by sun and rain, faintly recognizable, asked for ever more responsible positions in the life of this world near the sea. I stood reading them.

"Hey!"

And Dudley Stone plunged across the station platform behind me suddenly. "Is that you, Mr. Douglas!" I whirled to confront this great architecture of a man, big but not in the least fat, his legs huge pistons thrusting him on, a bright flower in his lapel, a bright tie at his neck. He crushed my hand, looked down upon me like Michelangelo's God creating Adam with a mighty touch. His face was the face of those illustrated North Winds and South Winds that blow hot and cold in ancient mariners' charts. It was the face that symbolizes the sun in Egyptian carvings, ablaze with life!

My God! I thought. And this is the man who hasn't written in twenty-odd years. Impossible. He's so alive it's sinful. I can hear his *heartbeat!*

I must have stood with my eyes very wide to let the look of him cram in upon my startled senses.

"You thought you'd find Marley's Ghost," he laughed. "Admit it."

"I—"

"My wife's waiting with a New England boiled dinner, we've plenty of ale and stout. I like the ring of those words. To *ale* is not to sicken, but to revive the flagging spirit. A tricky word, that. And *stout?* There's a nice ruddy sound to it. Stout!" A great golden watch bounced on his vest-front, hung in bright chains. He vised my elbow and charmed me along, a magician well on his way back to his cave with a luckless rabbit. "Glad to see you! I suppose you've come, as the others came, to ask the same question, eh? Well, this time I'll tell everything!"

My heart jumped. "Wonderful!"

Behind the empty station sat an open-top 1927-vintage Model-T Ford. "Fresh air. Drive at twilight like this, you get all the fields, the grass, the flowers coming at you in the wind. I hope you're not

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one of those who tiptoe around shutting windows! Our house is like the top of a mesa. We let the weather do our broom-work. Hop in!"

Ten minutes later we swung off the highway onto a drive that had not been leveled or filled in years. Stone drove straight on over the pits and bumps, smiling steadily. Bang! We shuddered the last few yards to a wild, unpainted two-story house. The car was allowed to gasp itself away into mortal silence.

"Do you want the truth?" Stone turned to look me in the face and hold my shoulder with an earnest hand. "I was murdered by a man with a gun twenty-five years ago almost to this very day."

I sat staring after him as he leapt from the car. He was solid as a ton of rock, no ghost to him, but yet I knew that somehow the truth was in what he had told me before firing himself like a cannon at the house.

"This is my wife, and this is the house, and that is our supper waiting for us! Look at our view. Windows on three sides of the living room, a view of the sea, the shore, the meadows. We nail the windows open three out of four seasons. I swear you get a smell of limes here midsummer, and something from Antarctica, ammonia and ice cream, come December. Sit down! Lena, isn't it *nice* having him here?"

"I hope you like New England boiled dinner," said Lena, now here, now there, a tall, firmly built woman, the sun in the East, Father Christmas' daughter, a bright lamp of a face that lit our table as she dealt out the heavy useful dishes made to stand the pound of giants' fists. The cutlery was solid enough to take a lion's teeth. A great whiff of steam rose up, through which we gladly descended, sinners into Hell. I saw the seconds-plate skim by three times and felt the ballast gather in my chest, my throat, and at last my ears. Dudley Stone poured me a brew he had made from wild Concords that had cried for mercy, he said. The wine bottle, empty, had its green glass mouth blown softly by Stone, who summoned out a rhythmic one-note tune that was quickly done.

"Well, I've kept you waiting long enough," he said, peering at me from that distance which drinking adds between people and which, at odd turns in the evening, seems closeness itself. "I'll tell you about my murder. I've never told anyone before; believe me. Do you know John Oatis Kendall?"

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"A minor writer in the Twenties, wasn't he?" I said. "A few books. Burnt out by '31. Died last week."

"God rest him." Mr. Stone lapsed into a special brief melancholy from which he revived as he began to speak again.

"Yes. John Oatis Kendall, burnt out by the year 1931, a writer of great potentialities."

"Not as great as yours," I said quickly.

"Well, just wait. We were boys together, John Oatis and I, born where the shade of an oak tree touched my house in the morning and his house at night, swam every creek in the world together, got sick on sour apples and cigarettes together, saw the same lights in the same blonde hair of the same young girl together, and in our late teens went out to kick Fate in the stomach and get beat on the head together.

"We both did fair, and then *I* better and still better as the years ran. If his first book got one good notice, mine got six; if I got one bad notice, he got a dozen. We were like two friends on a train the public has uncoupled. There went John Oatis on the caboose, left behind, crying out, 'Save me! You're leaving me in Tank Town, Ohio; We're on the same track!' And the conductor saying, 'Yes, but not the same *train!*' And myself yelling '*I* believe in you, John, be of good heart, I'll come back for you!' And the caboose dwindling behind with its red and green lamps like cherry and lime pops shining in the dark and we yelling our friendship to each other: 'John, old man!' 'Dudley, old pal!' while John Oatis went out on a dark siding behind a tin baling-shed at midnight and my engine, with all the flag-wavers and brass bands, boiled on toward dawn."

Dudley Stone paused and noticed my look of general confusion.

"All this to lead up to my murder," he said. "For it was John Oatis Kendall who, in 1930, traded a few old clothes and some remaindered copies of his books for a gun and came out to this house and this room."

"He really meant to kill you?"

"Meant to, hell! He did! Bang! Have some more wine? That's better."

A strawberry shortcake was set upon the table by Mrs. Stone, while he enjoyed my gibbering suspense. Stone sliced it into three huge chunks and served it around, fixing me with his kindly approximation of the Wedding Guest's eye.

"There he sat, John Oatis, in that chair where you sit now. Behind him, outside in the smokehouse, seventeen hams; in our wine cellars

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five hundred bottles of the best; beyond the window open country, the elegant sea in full lace; overhead a moon like a dish of cool cream, everywhere the full panoply of spring; and Lena across the table, too, a willow tree in the wind, laughing at everything I said or did not choose to say, both of us thirty, mind you—thirty years old, life our magnificent carousel, our fingers playing full chords, my books selling well, fan mail pouring upon us in crisp white founts, horses in the stables for moonlight rides to coves where either we or the sea might whisper all we wished in the night. And John Oatis seated there where you sit now, quietly taking the little blue gun from his pocket."

"I laughed, thinking it was a cigar lighter of some sort," said his wife.

"But John Oatis said quite seriously: 'I'm going to kill you, Stone.' "

"What did you do?"

"Do? I sat there, stunned, riven; I heard a terrible slam! the coffin lid in my face! I heard coal down a black chute; dirt on my buried door. They say all your *past* hurtles by at such times. Nonsense. The *future* does. You see your face a bloody porridge. You sit there until your fumbling mouth can say, 'But why, John, what have I *done* to you?'

" 'Done!' he cried.

"And his eye skimmed along the vast bookshelf and the handsome brigade of books drawn stiffly to attention there with my name on each blazing like a panther's eye in the Moroccan blackness. 'Done!' he cried, mortally. And his hand itched the revolver in a sweat.

" 'Now, John,' I cautioned. 'What do you want?'

" 'One thing more than anything else in the world,' he said. 'To kill you and be famous. Get my name in headlines. Be famous as you are famous. Be known for a lifetime and beyond as the man who killed Dudley Stone!'

" 'You can't mean that!'

" 'I do. I'll be very famous. Far more famous than I am today, in your shadow. Oh, listen here, no one in the world knows how to hate like a writer does. God, how I love your work and, God, how I hate you because you write so well. Amazing ambivalence. But I can't take it any more, not being able to write as you do, so I'll take my fame the easy way. I'll cut you off before you reach your prime. They say your next book will be your very finest, your most brilliant!'

" 'They exaggerate.'

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" 'My guess is they're right,' he said.

"I looked beyond him to Lena, who sat in her chair, frightened, but not frightened enough to scream or run and spoil the scene so it might end inadvertently.

" 'Calm,' I said. 'Calmness. Sit there, John. I ask only one minute. Then pull the trigger.'

" 'No!' Lena whispered.

" 'Calmness,' I said to her, to myself, to John Oatis.

"I gazed out the open windows, I felt the wind, I thought of the wine in the cellar, the coves at the beach, the sea, the night moon like a disc of menthol cooling the summer heavens, drawing clouds of flaming salt, the stars, after it in a wheel toward morning. I thought of myself only thirty, Lena thirty, our whole lives ahead. I thought of all the flesh of life hung high and waiting for me to really *start* banqueting! I had never climbed a mountain, I had never sailed an ocean, I had never run for mayor, I had never dived for pearls, I had never owned a telescope, I had never acted on a stage or built a house or read all the classics I had so *wished* to read. All the *actions* to be done!

"So in that almost instantaneous sixty seconds, I thought at last of my career. The books I had written, the books I *was* writing, the books I intended to write. The reviews, the sales, our huge balance in the bank. And, believe or disbelieve me, for the first time in my life I got free of it all. I became, in one moment, a critic. I cleared the scales. On one hand I put all the boats I hadn't taken, the flowers I hadn't planted, the children I hadn't raised, all the hills I hadn't looked at, with Lena there, goddess of the harvest. In the middle I put John Oatis Kendall with his gun—the upright that held the balances. And on the empty scale opposite I laid my pen, my ink, my empty paper, my dozen books. I made some minor adjustments. The sixty seconds were ticking by. The sweet night wind blew across the table. It touched a curl of hair on Lena's neck. Oh Lord, how softly, softly it touched . . .

"The gun pointed at me. I have seen the moon craters in photographs, and that hole in space called the Great Coal Sack Nebula, but neither was as big, take my word, as the mouth of that gun across the room from me.

" 'John,' I said at last, 'do you hate me *that* much? Because I've been lucky and you not?'

" 'Yes, damn it!' he cried.

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"It was almost funny he should envy me. I was not that much better a writer than he. A flick of the wrist made the difference.

" 'John,' I said quietly to him, 'if you want me dead, I'll *be* dead. Would you like for me to never write again?"

" 'I'd like nothing better!' he cried. 'Get ready!' He aimed at my heart!

" 'All right,' I said, 'I'll never write again.'

" 'What!' he said.

" 'We're old friends, we've never lied to each other, have we? Then take my word, from this night on I'll never put pen to paper.'

" 'Oh *God*,' he said, and laughed with contempt and disbelief.

" 'There,' I said, nodding my head at the desk near him, 'are the only original copies of the two books I've been working on for the last three years. I'll burn one in front of you now. The other you yourself may throw in the sea. Clean out the house, take everything faintly resembling literature, burn my published books, too. Here.' I got up. He could have shot me then, but I had him fascinated. I tossed one manuscript on the hearth and touched a match to it.

" 'No!' Lena said. I turned. 'I know what I'm doing,' I said. She began to cry. John Oatis Kendall simply stared at me, bewitched. I brought him the other unpublished manuscript. 'Here,' I said, tucking it under his right shoe so his foot was a paper weight. I went back and sat down. The wind was blowing and the night was warm and Lena was white as apple-blossoms there across the table.

"I said, 'From this day forward I will not write ever again.'

"At last John Oatis managed to say, 'How can you do this?'

" 'To make everyone happy,' I said. 'To make you happy because we'll be friends again, eventually. To make Lena happy because I'll be just her husband again and no agent's performing seal. And myself happy because I'd rather be a live man that a dead author. A dying man will do anything, John. Now take my last novel and get along with you.'

"We sat there, the three of us, just as we three are sitting tonight. There was a smell of lemons and limes and camellias. The ocean roared on the stony coastland below—God, what a lovely moonlit sound. And at last, picking up the manuscripts, John Oatis took them, like my body, out of the room. He paused at the door and said, 'I believe you.' And then he was gone. I heard him drive away. I put Lena to bed. That was one of the few nights in my life I ever walked down by the shore, but walk I did, taking deep breaths and feeling my arms and legs and my face with my hands, crying like a child,

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walking and wading in the surf to feel the cold salt water foaming about me in a million suds."

Dudley Stone paused. Time had made a stop in the room. Time was in another year, the three of us sitting there, enchanted with his telling of the murder.

"And did he destroy your last novel?" I asked.

Dudley Stone nodded. "A week later one of the pages drifted up on the shore. He must have thrown them over the cliff, a thousand pages—I see it in my mind's eye, a flock of white sea-gulls it might seem, flying down to the water and going out with the tide at four in the black morning. Lena ran up the beach with that single page in her hand, crying, 'Look, look!' And when I saw what she handed me, I tossed it back in the ocean."

"Don't tell me you honored your promise!"

Dudley Stone looked at me steadily. "What would *you* have done in a similar position? Look at it this way: John Oatis did me a favor. He didn't kill me. He didn't shoot me. He took my word. He honored my word. He let me live. He let me go on eating and sleeping and breathing. Quite suddenly he had broadened my horizons. I was so grateful that standing on the beach hip-deep in water that night, I cried. I was grateful. Do you really understand that word? Grateful he had let me live when he had had it in his hand to annihilate me forever."

Mrs. Stone rose up; the dinner was ended. She cleared the dishes, we lit cigars, and Dudley Stone strolled me over to his office-at-home, a rolltop desk, its jaws propped wide with parcels and papers and ink bottles, a typewriter, documents, ledgers, indexes.

"It was all rolling to a boil in me. John Oatis simply spooned the froth off the top so I could see the brew. It was very clear," said Dudley Stone. "Writing was always so much mustard and gallweed to me; fidgeting words on paper, experiencing vast depressions of heart and soul. Watching the greedy critics graph me up, chart me down, slice me like sausage, eat me at midnight breakfasts. Work of the worst sort. I was *ready* to fling the pack. My trigger was set. Boom! There was John Oatis! Look here."

He rummaged in the desk and brought forth hand-bills and posters. "I had been *writing* about living. Now I wanted to live. *Do* things instead of tell about things. I ran for the board of education. I won. I ran for alderman. I won. I ran for mayor. I won! Sheriff! Town librarian! Sewage disposal official. I shook a lot of hands, saw a lot

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of life, did a lot of things. We've lived every way there is to live, with our eyes and noses and mouths, with our ears and hands. We've climbed hills and painted pictures, there are some on the wall! We've been three times around the world! I even delivered our baby son, unexpectedly. He's grown and married now—lives in New York! We've done and done again." Stone paused and smiled. "Come on out in the yard; we've set up a telescope. Would you like to see the rings of Saturn?"

We stood in the yard, and the wind blew from a thousand miles at sea and while we were standing there, looking at the stars through the telescope, Mrs. Stone went down into the midnight cellar after a rare Spanish wine.

It was noon the next day when we reached the lonely station after a hurricane trip across the jouncing meadows from the sea. Mr. Dudley Stone let the car have its head, while he talked to me, laughing, smiling, pointing to this or that outcrop of Neolithic stone, this or that wild flower, falling silent again only as we parked and waited for the train to come and take me away.

"I suppose," he said, looking at the sky, "you think I'm quite insane."

"No, I'd never say that."

"Well," said Dudley Stone, "John Oatis Kendall did me one other favor."

"What was that?"

Stone hitched around conversationally in the patched leather seat.

"He helped me get out when the going was good. Deep down inside I must have guessed that my literary success was something that would melt when they turned off the cooling system. My subconscious had a pretty fair picture of my future. I knew what none of my critics knew, that I was headed nowhere but down. The two books John Oatis destroyed were very bad. They would have killed me deader than Oatis possibly could. So he helped me decide, unwittingly, what I might not have had the courage to decide myself, to bow gracefully out while the cotillion was still on, while the Chinese lanterns still cast flattering pink lights on my Harvard complexion. I had seen too many writers up, down, and out, hurt, unhappy, suicidal. The combination of circumstance, coincidence, subconscious knowledge, relief, and gratitude to John Oatis Kendall to just *be alive* were fortuitous, to say the least."

We sat in the warm sunlight another minute.

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"And then I had the pleasure of seeing myself compared to all the greats when I announced my departure from the literary scene. Few authors in recent history have bowed out to such publicity. It was a lovely funeral. I looked, as they say, natural. And the echoes lingered. 'His *next* book!' the critics cried, 'would have been *it!* A masterpiece!' I had them panting, waiting. Little did they know.

"Even now, a quarter century later, my readers who were college boys then make sooty excursions on drafty kerosene-stinking short-line trains to solve the mystery of why I've made them wait so long for my 'masterpiece.' And thanks to John Oatis Kendall I still have a little reputation; it has receded slowly, painlessly. The next year I might have died by my own writing hand. How much better to cut your own caboose off the train, before others do it for you.

"My friendship with John Oatis Kendall? It came back. It took time, of course. But he was out here to see me in 1947—it was a nice day, all around, like old times. And now he's dead and at last I've told someone everything. What will you tell your friends in the city? They won't believe a word of this. But it *is* true, I swear it, as I sit here and breathe God's good air and look at the calluses on my hands and begin to resemble the faded handbills I used when I ran for county treasurer."

We stood on the station platform.

"Goodbye, and thanks for coming and opening your ears and letting my world crash in on you. God bless to all your curious friends. Here comes the train. I've got to run—Lena and I are going to a Red Cross drive down the coast this afternoon! Goodbye!"

I watched the dead man stomp and leap across the platform, felt the plankings shudder, saw him jump into his Model-T, heard it lurch under his bulk, saw him bang the floorboards with a big foot, idle the motor, roar it, turn, smile, wave to me, and then roar off and away toward that suddenly brilliant town called Obscurity by a dazzling seashore called The Past.

"Q"

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JAMES HOLDING

"Ten thousand!" Woody exclaimed.

Michaels said, "There's a lot of labor involved, Woody. And remember, what you're doing ain't exactly legal . . . "

Last year James Holding was honored with a scroll from the Mystery Writers of America for having written what they considered to be one of the four best short stories published in 1982—"A Decent Price for a Painting," which appeared in the August 1982 issue of EQMM. "A Decent Price for a Painting" was a con story. So is "A Temporary Bind." Mr. Holding excels at con stories . . .

A TEMPORARY BIND

by JAMES HOLDING

Didn't somebody famous once say that all good things come to an end?

Whoever he was, he could have had me in mind. For more than two years I'd been living the good life on my cut of the Pelican Bank robbery—nice little apartment, big fancy car, girls, gambling, all the rest. But all at once my money ran out and my luck, too—as well as my credit, as far as Leo Guardini was concerned. Leo ran a small private gambling club and was holding ten thousand dollars' worth of my markers—he was getting impatient with me, and Leo is a guy you don't want feeling impatient with you for very long.

So now all I had left was my car.

I maneuvered it through the brick archway at the end of the alley, drove a hundred yards forward, and turned into the entrance of a garage with the name MICHAELS lettered inconspicuously above it.

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The garage had been a brewery warehouse before the national outfits put most of the local breweries out of business. Now it was an auto-repair and body shop. There were half a dozen cars in the bays being worked on by mechanics, and beyond them I could see somebody spray-painting a newly straightened fender.

I switched off my motor. The nearest mechanic raised his eyes from his work, gave me a sharp glance, then came over to me with a socket wrench still in his hand. He spoke through my rolled-down window.

"What can we do for you?" he asked. His eyes were roving over the car like those of a drunk sizing up a stripper. "What a set of wheels!" he breathed with honest admiration. "What's wrong with it?"

"I think it may need some work," I said. "Are you the boss?"

He grinned. "No way. That's his office over there." He nodded toward a small partitioned-off cubicle at one side of the garage. "You want to see him?"

"Yeah," I said.

He raised his voice. "Mr. Michaels! Guy wants to see you!"

I got out of the car and went to meet the tall, shambling, bald-headed man who emerged from the door of his tiny office. "Mr. Michaels?" I inquired when we were close enough.

"That's me." Michaels' voice was warm and interested but his eyes were something else again. There was no color in them at all—they were as cold and colorless as ice water. "Something I can do for you?"

"Maybe," I said. "Harry Childs seemed to think so." I watched his expression, but it didn't change at the mention of Harry Childs' name. He merely turned on his heel and said over his shoulder, "Come into the office and tell me about it."

I followed him in. Motioning me to a dirty straight-backed chair beside his cluttered desk, he sank into a swivel chair that creaked protestingly as it took his weight. "You know Harry Childs?" he asked with an air of indifference.

"We graduated from the same college," I said. "Down in Raiford." I saw some of the tightness go out of his face at the mention of the state prison.

"Well," he said, "any friend of Harry is a friend of mine. Mr.—?"

"Jenkins. Woody Jenkins."

"Okay, Woody. What is it Harry thinks I can do for you?"

I answered bluntly, "Strip my car and put it out on the street."

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He stared. "That beautiful car out there? It lists around twenty-five grand, don't it?"

"Twenty-four when I bought it two years ago."

"Do you own it?"

"Lock, stock, and barrel."

His colorless eyes examined my face. "So?"

"So I need money, Mr. Michaels. Cash. I'm in a temporary bind. So the car has to go."

He gave me a half grin that didn't show his teeth. "Oh," he said, "like that, huh? No problem if we can strike a deal."

"Good," I said, feeling vastly relieved. "Let's talk about that."

He said slowly, "We strip your car down to the frame and put it on the street for the cops to find after you've reported your car was stolen, right?"

"Right."

"And since it's a total loss when found, you collect actual cash value from your insurance company, huh?"

"That's it."

"Is the car insured?"

"Covered like a tent. Comprehensive, fire, theft—the works."

"Premiums all paid up?"

"Till the end of the year."

He took down a book from a wall shelf and consulted it briefly. "Actual cash value ought to be about twenty, twenty-one thousand. That enough to cover the cash you need after my costs?"

"That depends on what you'd charge me," I said.

"Ten thousand," he said promptly.

"Ten thousand!"

Michaels said, "There's a lot of labor involved, Woody. And remember, what you're doing ain't exactly legal."

"But you get to keep the parts and sell them! They ought to be worth a small fortune off a car like mine!"

He shook his head. "They ain't. I never had a call for parts like yours, Woody—probably never will. I've got to be sure of a little profit before I deal."

I kept quiet.

"See, what it is," he said, "is that I mostly sell parts for little compacts, Woody—not for big beautiful supercars like yours." He flashed me a knowing smile. "You've already tried the used-car dealers, right?"

I still kept quiet.

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"And they offered you peanuts for your fancy car, am I right? Because they couldn't move it again if they gave it away. Who's going to buy a used car these days that gets only seven or eight miles to a gallon of hi-test gas?"

He was right again. The best offer I'd had from a used-car dealer was seventy-five hundred.

"Ten thousand," said Michaels. "Is it a deal?"

I did some quick arithmetic. Say twenty-one for the insurance, less ten for Michaels, would leave me just about enough to pay off my IOUs to Leo Guardini, with maybe a few bucks left over for walking-around money until I made my next score. I said, "If that's your lowest figure—"

"It's a fair figure," Michaels said and rubbed his bald head vigorously. I knew he was lying—it wasn't a fair deal at all—but I desperately needed the cash.

I said, "Okay, it's a deal."

"Fine," said Michaels. "You got your insurance policy with you? And your registration card?"

I put them on the desk. He studied them. "Cosmopolitan Fidelity." He nodded approvingly at my insurance policy. "That's a good solid outfit." He folded the policy and handed it back to me along with the registration card.

When I'd stowed them away in my pocket, he sat staring at me for several minutes without saying a word, his expression half thoughtful, half assessing. Finally, he slapped the top of his desk and said, "Listen, Woody. You're a friend of Harry Childs. That's one thing. He sent you to me, or recommended me, anyway. But that don't necessarily mean anything much to me, except that on top of that I kind of like your style. You been straight with me—no double-talk, no pussyfooting around. I like that, too." He paused and looked out his door at the mechanics working away in the garage. "So I'm going to tell you something—just between the two of us, Woody, you know what I mean?"

"I can hardly wait," I said. "What's the big news?"

"There's a better way to work this insurance scam of yours than the way we got it rigged."

"A better way?"

"Yeah. Won't cost you any more, either." He leaned across the desk conspiratorily. "What if you could get the insurance money and still end up owning your car in as good a shape as ever?"

I stared at him. "What's the catch?"

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"No catch. It works the same as we planned except for one little difference. After you file your claim for total loss, we haul the wreck in here to my shop and replace everything we took off it. Then we paint it a different color."

I felt a sudden warm rush of feeling for Michaels. "Hey," I said, "are you serious?"

"Sure. No problem, long as you make sure it's me you call to haul away the wreck when the cops find it on the street."

I said, "And you won't charge me any more?"

"Same price, Woody. Ten grand."

"How come, when you're doing twice the work?"

"I told you. Because I kind of like your style. And also—" he shrugged "—because that cost figure I gave you before was a mite high."

I began to burn a little. "How high?"

"About five thousand," he said calmly. "A little margin for safety."

I did a quick mental calculation again, and for the life of me I couldn't see why this proposition wasn't better than his first.

We shook hands on it.

"Shall I leave the car here now?"

Michaels nodded. "We'll have her stripped and out on the streets somewhere by dawn."

"Where?"

"Better you don't know. Then you can be surprised when the cops notify you they found it."

"When do I report that it's been stolen?"

"Go to the movies or something tonight, and when you come out call the cops and say your car's gone."

"Fine." I stood up. "I'll let you know when to come and get the wreck." I was struck by a sudden thought. "What about your boys out there in the shop?"

"Best stripping crew in town. Which makes us the best chop shop south of Jacksonville. Don't worry about them. They get a piece of the action."

"Okay." I lifted a hand in farewell, walked through the shop out into the alley, and picked up a taxi a couple of blocks away to take me home.

At nine-thirty the following day, a police officer named Cullen called me to inform me that a patrol car had located my stolen automobile in an alley behind a combination pool-hall and bar in

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the Cuban ghetto. At least, said Cullen, they had located what was *left* of my car. "It's stripped down to a skeleton," he said sympathetically.

"Stripped?" I asked, as though I didn't know what he meant.

"Yeah. Everything salable taken off it."

"Salable? How do you mean?"

"On the black market, Mr. Jenkins. There's a black market for everything these days, including auto parts."

I allowed distress to creep into my voice. "Do you mean my car won't *run?*"

"Run? It won't even walk, Mr. Jenkins. It's got no wheels, no bumpers, no fenders, no radiator, no engine, no nothing. It's a very dead duck."

I swore feelingly, putting my heart into it. "What do I do now?" I asked.

"Sell it for junk is my advice. It's insured, I hope?"

"Of course," I said, "but—"

"Then your insurance company will handle everything for you. Have you reported the theft to them yet?"

"I was about to call them when you called me."

"Do it now, then. I'm sorry to give you such bad news, Mr. Jenkins."

"Not your fault," I told him. "Thanks for calling. And I hope you catch whoever—"

"We're trying," he said without much conviction.

I called Michaels and told him about my conversation with Officer Cullen.

"Good," he said. "I'll send a wrecker out for your car right away." He laughed. "You don't need to tell me where it is."

"And now what?" I asked.

"Call your insurance company like the cop said. Tell them I'm hauling in the wreck and their adjuster can look it over at my shop any time after noon today."

"Okay."

"Ask for a Mr. Reilly at Cosmopolitan Fidelity," said Michaels. "I've dealt with him a few times before."

"Reilly," I said. "I'll do it. Thanks, Mr. Michaels."

I hung up and called Cosmopolitan Fidelity and asked for Mr. Reilly. When he came on the line, he said "Reilly speaking" in a brisk no-nonsense voice. "What can I do for you?"

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I introduced myself, I reported the theft of my car last night and its recovery by the police this morning, and told him it would be available for him to examine at Michaels' garage that afternoon.

"What do the police say?" he asked.

"They called it a 'dead duck.' A total loss."

"Mmmm," said Reilly, "Well, I'll have a look at it. I'll be in touch with you, Mr. Jenkins, about filing your claim."

"When?" I asked.

"As soon as I find out if the police know a total loss when they see one. Goodbye."

It didn't sound promising, but I decided not to worry about Mr. Reilly's verdict. If Michaels knew what Reilly would accept as "total," as he must because he said he had dealt with Reilly before, we were going to be all right.

A week went by, I had a call from Mr. Reilly, telling me he had approved my claim of total loss and would start processing it at once. I had a call from Mr. Michaels to tell me he would have my car reconstituted as good as new in a day or so. I went one evening to Leo Guardini's gambling club to explain the situation to him and assure him on my solemn oath that he would get the money I owed him at last. And on Friday morning, I got another call from Reilly that my claim had been processed and that he was putting my check in the mail for me.

"How much?" I asked.

"Twenty even," he said.

I thought about Mr. Michaels and Leo Guardini and said, "Would it be possible for you to give me the settlement in cash, Mr. Reilly?"

He hesitated for an instant before he said, "I guess that could be arranged. In that case we'd need your signature on a release form. Usually, your endorsement on our check would constitute a release."

"I'll be happy to sign your release as soon as I get the money. Shall I stop by your office for it?"

He said, "Wait a minute, Mr. Jenkins. Let me look at my schedule." Several moments of silence. Then, "If you like, I can bring you the cash personally this afternoon—save you the trouble of coming here. Will you be home around five?"

I said I would and thanked him for his consideration.

He was as good as his word. At exactly five o'clock, he knocked on my apartment door. I let him in, invited him to sit down, and

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offered him a drink, which he declined. He had a small leather briefcase with him. He opened it and took from it a sealed manila envelope and a document I assumed was his release form.

He slit open the sealed envelope with his finger and emptied its contents on the end table beside his chair. "Will you please count this, Mr. Jenkins?" he said.

It was a pleasure and it didn't take me long. The money was in nice new one hundred dollar bills. "Twenty thousand even," I said when I finished counting. "You want me to sign your release now?"

"Please." He had a pen ready in his hand. I signed without reading it. He put the release form back into his briefcase and his pen back in his pocket. "I guess that's it, then, Mr. Jenkins. It's been a pleasure working with you." He was getting to his feet when a knock sounded on my door.

"Probably our maintenance man." I went to the door. "I've got a leaky faucet in my bathroom."

I opened the door. It wasn't the maintenance man who stood in the hall. It was Mr. Michaels. Before I could warn him, he said heartily, "Hi, Woody. I brought your car over for you. All finished. Back together as good as new, and the new color—" He broke off abruptly as I scowled and put a finger to my lips.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Michaels. I've got company. But he's just leaving. Come on in."

Michaels' ice-water eyes took in the money on the table and Mr. Reilly's suddenly suspicious expression in a single quick glance. He said, "I'm sorry to interrupt you. How are you, Mr. Reilly? Go on with your business, please. Don't mind me."

"Hello, Mr. Michaels," Reilly said stiffly. "I thought we'd finished our business, Mr. Jenkins and I, but now I seriously doubt it."

"How come?" I asked. "I've got my money and you've got your release. Isn't that all of it?"

"No," Reilly said grimly. "I must infer, from what Mr. Michaels said to you at the door, before he realized I was within earshot, that you and he have been engaged in an attempt—almost successful—to defraud my company."

I loosened my collar and tie and threw a dirty look at Michaels. "I don't get it," I said.

"Mr. Michaels spoke of putting your car back together again as good as new. And something about a new color. Those words smell strongly of insurance fraud to me."

I said, "There's nothing illegal about spending my insurance

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money to have my wrecked car fixed up again, is there? Instead of selling it for scrap?"

Mr. Reilly pointed contemptuously at the money on the table. "You mean with this? Twenty thousand dollars? To buy the necessary parts and put your car back in running order and repaint it? Are you kidding?" He was sarcastic now. "Did you know, Mr. Jenkins, that it costs more than twenty-five thousand dollars in parts and labor to rebuild a little six-thousand dollar *compact* that's been stripped as yours was?" He turned toward Michaels. "Isn't that so, George?"

George? Faint warning bells rang in my head.

I said, with an accusing look at Michaels, "Is that true?"

Michaels nodded carelessly. "Yeah. It's true."

"Then why—?" My voice trailed off. I looked at them in silence for a matter of thirty seconds or so. Finally I said, "You set me up, didn't you? The two of you?"

Michaels gave me a big grin. This time, his eyes joined in. He crossed his legs and sighed. "Confession time, Woody. Just a simple scam. I get fifteen of your twenty-grand settlement and Reilly gets five. That's because me and my crew do the heavy work and Reilly only has to fiddle with a few papers."

I felt the adrenalin begin to flow. "You deliberately set out to con me out of my insurance money?"

"*You* were trying to con the insurance company out of it in the first place, Woody," Michaels pointed out. "So why not be reasonable about it?"

"Don't call me Woody," I said. My face felt stiff.

Michaels shrugged his big shoulders. "Okay. But you ain't getting hurt, don't you understand that? You got your beautiful car back as good as new, didn't you?"

"You can start your con all over again with some other insurance company," suggested Reilly.

Watching the expression on my face, Michaels said, "Don't take it so hard. You spent time in Raiford. You know that you win some and you lose some. But this time everybody wins. Right?"

Finally, reluctantly, I nodded. Michaels and Reilly grinned at each other. I said, "How long have you two been working together?"

Michaels rubbed his bald head and winked at Reilly. "Me and Tim go back a long way. Went to the same college up north, matter of fact. We were classmates at Folsom."

"Ah," I said. "Well, as I made clear to you in the beginning, Mi-

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chaels, I need cash. C-A-S-H." I spelled it out for them, college men or not. "So where am I going to get it now?"

Reilly lit a cigarette. "I know a used-car dealer who'll give you thirty-five hundred for your gas-hog, whether it's hot or cold. Actually, your car doesn't exist any more officially."

I shook my head. "Not enough," I said.

"Well, that's your problem, I guess," said Michaels. They got to their feet. "As Tim told you, it's been a pleasure working with you." He motioned at the cash on the table. "Put it in your case, Tim."

Reilly had opened his briefcase to comply when the closed door between my living room and bedroom was pushed open and Leo Guardini emerged from the bedroom. All by himself, Leo is an impressive figure. Weighing nearly three hundred pounds, he is shaped like an oversized basketball with legs, arms, and a head. No neck. This grotesque body was clothed in the flamboyant finery dreamed up by a custom tailor who must have had Savile Row training. When Leo Guardini comes into a room, conversations tend to dwindle into silence and names like Scarface, Luciano, and Corleone flash through the mind. When he is flanked, as he was tonight, by the Carmoli twins, whose skills run largely to the breaking of arms and legs, Leo is truly a majestic sight.

He walked to the table on which the cash was stacked, took a quick look at the money, then said to me in his high clear tenor voice, "You were dead right, Woody. From what I heard through the door, these boys you're dealing with would poison their grandmothers for a buck and a half." His seal-brown eyes had a flat deadly sheen to them as he turned them on Reilly and Michaels. "Which is which, Woody? Who's insurance and who's chop shop?"

I said, "Reilly, there," pointing to him, "is insurance. Cosmopolitan Fidelity. Michaels there is chop shop."

"Okay," Guardini said. "Is this my money?" He gestured toward the bills on the table.

"That's it," I said. "You get half. Ten thousand, Leo. And I'm sorry I was so long arranging the payoff. Help yourself."

Guardini meticulously counted out ten thousand dollars from the stack, thrust the money into his pocket, then handed me a sheaf of IOU's with my signature on them. "Here are your markers, Woody," he said genially. "You're free and clear now. Come back and try your luck again at the club any time you want."

I slowly tore the IOU's into little pieces and threw the pieces into the wastebasket. I didn't say anything. Neither did Reilly or Mi-

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chaels. Guardini turned his massive body toward the door. To his guardian twins, who trailed him like heeling dogs, he said, "Take a good look at these two fellows, boys. Will you know them again?"

Both twins nodded as though their heads were jerked by a single string. Guardini went to the door and opened it. "Okay, Woody," he said over his shoulder, "Let me know if they ever bother you again, will you?"

"Sure," I said, "and thanks, Leo." He went out, followed by his muscular henchmen. The door closed softly behind them.

About two minutes of empty silence followed their departure. Reilly was looking pale and I noticed that the hand holding his cigarette was trembling. Michaels was made of sterner stuff. He was pale, too, but it was from anger. He said in a choked voice, "You slippery bastard—you knew we were setting you up, didn't you?"

"Of course," I said, enjoying myself. "You'll have to improve your technique before you try your game on the next sucker."

"What tipped you off?" Michaels' curiosity got the better of his anger.

"You got too friendly too fast after you saw I was insured by Cosmopolitan Fidelity. And when you told me to ask for Reilly by name when I called the insurance company about my claim, I figured you had a little game going between you."

Michaels cooled his temper by swearing, not very originally, at some length. Reilly hadn't opened his mouth since Guardini left.

I said, "As you pointed out to me, Mr. Michaels, you win some and you lose some." I picked up the remaining ten thousand dollars on the table and went over and locked the bills into a drawer of my desk. Then I held out my hand to Michaels. "You got my car keys? I'd like to see what kind of a restoration job you did on my car." He tossed me the car keys, more inventive in his cursing this time.

"Can I drop you boys off anywhere?" I asked politely.

Reilly came out of his traumatic trance. "The Cozy Corner Bar on East Twelfth," he said hoarsely. "I need a drink."

"Fine," I said. "I'll do better than drop you off. I'll come in and buy you both a drink. I could use one myself."

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF THIRD STORIES

This third story from Marge Blaine is as much a departure from her second story, "Goodbye, Wardsboro," in the Mid-July 1983 issue of EQMM as "Goodbye, Wardsboro" was a departure from her first story, "My Compliments to the Chef," in the February 24, 1982 issue: Variety—a very vital sign in a writer, and an especially promising sign in a new writer . . .

"Isabella's Eyes" is set in Parthenay at the turn of the century, but as the author quite rightly pointed out in the cover letter that came with the manuscript, "One might feel the same way today . . ."

ISABELLA'S EYES

by MARGE BLAINE

The cobblestones of Parthenay are hard on my feet. And the steep climb from the *centre ville* becomes more difficult each day.

When I was a girl, it didn't seem to matter. Who noticed such things then? There was the bread to knead for Maman, the babies to watch, and the water to fetch from the village pump. It's lucky that load is lightened now. I'd never be able to carry the heavy pail at my age. And there is no one else left to help.

All are gone. Gone or dead. Except for Isabella. Once again we are living next door to each other, as we did when we were girls. It is strange, yet fitting after what has happened over the years.

How I hated her then. How I hate her still. Some might say I had no reason. But if you knew the truth, you would understand.

The past dances before me: Isabella in her doorway, playing with a bit of silk cloth turned into a doll. I am sweeping the doorstep with a broom cut short enough for my four-year-old arms.

"Maria!" she calls. "Come. Look what I have."

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I know there is much work to be done that morning, but the bright colors pull me toward her.

"Ohhh. It's so soft! Let me hold it."

"Careful," Isabella warns. "Don't let it fall. Here's another. This can be the mother. That one's the child." She croons a lullaby. I become lost in the game. Baby dolls are not as demanding as the real thing.

Suddenly my ear is on fire. Maman has it between her fingers, dragging me back to what I must do. A few blows on my back with the sharp twigs of the broom and I begin to sweep again, trying not to cry.

Isabella's eyes meet mine and she smiles. That hurts more than the blows. I can never forgive her for witnessing my humiliation. And I will not be tempted again.

I cannot help but see her. After all, our houses almost touch. Yet her life is so different from mine it's as though we lived in other worlds. She, the spoiled darling, youngest in her family, plays and sings in the courtyard, while I, the oldest, am forced into a life of drudgery. I envy her her well made clothes and easy life. The envy grows, fueled by a thousand small occurrences, and after a time the envy turns to hate.

Several years pass. We are at the village pump. She has no need to be there—her mother hires a village girl to carry their water and another washes their clothes—but everyone passes the pump during the day. It is one of the few places a young woman can catch the attention of a young man away from her mother's sharp eye.

I have a bucket of clothes soiled by the youngest baby. There was a new one almost every year, though only five survived. This one has a stomach upset that keeps him up all night and turns his bowels to water. The smell assails my nose.

Isabella leans back on the stone wall behind the pump, her eyes keeping track of all who pass. Her fingers are busy with what seems to be hundreds of spools, twisting them around and around to make lace. Other girls crowd around her. Even the women stop to look.

"It's lovely!"

"How do you do that?"

"I could never keep all those threads straight."

An old woman, stooped with age, peers at the work. "Very beautiful," she announces. *"Tres belle."*

Isabella shrugs modestly and ducks her head, but I note a gleam

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of triumph in her eyes. Her long hair falls, covering her face. Then she flings it back with a practiced motion of her head and returns to her work.

It is too much. I want to be part of the group, see what she has made, too. I leave the half-washed clothes in the wooden bucket I am using and draw closer. I reach out my hand. "Let me see?"

A faint perfume clings to the lace. Or perhaps it's the scent of Isabella's clothing. How unfair that she should smell of dried flowers and I of dirty clothes. Isabella snatches the lace back, pulling it to the safety of her lap. "Watch out! You'll get it dirty!"

My face is hot as though it's been slapped. Someone laughs. Is it Isabella or one of the other girls? No matter—she will not have the chance to laugh at me again.

During the next months, we meet at the village pump or walk up the same cobblestoned hill to the Rue d'Eglise, but not a word passes between us. Once Isabella calls, "Maria! Wait! There is something I must tell you!" But I do not answer her. All I want is to hide from her sight, from those eyes that proclaim her superiority.

We all wear the same kind of clothing—dark, long-sleeved dresses reaching almost to the ground. And a white coiffe to cover our heads, the style slightly different in each village. So it is not what she wears that sets Isabella apart.

I try to discover what attracts the notice of all the males in our town, boys as well as the old men who sit in front of the bar. Perhaps it is her way of half looking at whoever she's talking to, her eyes hinting at things she will not say. Or her thick dark hair which forms a curtain around her face. They follow her—only with their eyes, of course—as she goes to the *boulangerie* or crosses the square in the center of town.

I wonder, as I have so many times in the past, why she should have so much and I so little. It happens once again. The two most eligible young men our age, Pierre and Francois, are both smitten. I would be grateful if either would choose me, but she keeps them both. She plays them as a cat might with two wounded birds, first pulling one towards her, then the other. Promising. Teasing. Always with a smile on her lips. What chance did I have until Isabella made her choice?

Pierre and Francois begin walking up the Rue d'Eglise in the evenings after dinner, when they are sure to find Isabella at the window. I take care to be out, too, saving some small chore that will

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assure they will see me—sweeping the doorstep or emptying the slops into the street.

"Bonjour, Pierre. Bonjour, Francois," I greet them.

"Good evening, Maria," both answer politely.

Isabella says nothing to them, but it is she they have eyes for. They wait, as I wait, for her to make her preference known. The other, I am sure, will settle for me. I must escape the trap of this house and my mother's children. At least my own will call *me* Maman.

One day as I am on my way home from the *boulangerie* I hear footsteps behind me. It is not until I begin the climb up our hill that I realize someone is following. When I reach a curve where the street narrows, a hand reaches out to grasp my arm.

"Ssh! Don't say anything. I must speak with you." It is a heavy-bearded man with broad shoulders. I know him slightly. He's one of those who sit in front of the bar when he is not loading hay for a nearby farmer.

"What is it?"

"I need your help. With her." He jerks his thumb toward the bottom of the hill where Isabella can be seen lounging near the pump. "I have to see her. Alone."

I wait to hear him out. I sense from his manner that he is no danger to me.

"What can I do?"

"Get her to go with you to the orchard. The one behind your house. I'll be at the very end. No one will see us there. Can you manage it?"

I nod.

"Tonight?"

"Yes," I whisper. He presses a coin into my hand. It is only later that I see it is five francs, enough to buy bread for my family for a month.

"There'll be another for you after you've done what you've promised. And not a word of this to anyone, you understand."

"Of course," I tell him. I thrust the coin deep into my pocket. Isabella would walk with me that evening. I'd find some pretext. She had no reason to distrust me.

I never found out what happened that night. I brought her to the orchard and left, saying I'd forgotten my shawl. I may have heard

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screams in the darkness, but I may have only imagined it. Isabella never said anything to me about it afterward. Nor to anyone else.

A few months later she married Pierre. Quickly, without the customary long betrothal. A child was born the next spring, an early baby. It died at birth.

I kept one coin for luck and used the other for a pair of gold earrings. Maybe they were what attracted Francois. Or was it that he finally knew Isabella was not to be his? We married on the very day Isabella's baby was born dead.

Perhaps it brought us bad luck. In any case, I was unable to conceive, barren. It could have been Francois' fault, but I think not. In later years he shared Isabella's bed. And her youngest boy has Francois' dark complexion. Oh, yes—she chose one, but she had them both.

Isabella had everything. Love. Beauty. An easy life. Only in the last few years, the scales have been evened. Her children grew up and moved far off: Lille, Paris, Perpignon. Much good they are to her now. And Pierre died young. Now she has no one, just like me.

My own life flew by. It was as though one day Francois and I were married and the next he was gone and I was an old woman. Our years of drudgery on his brother's farm seemed only a dream.

Since Maman died and I moved back, Isabella and I have lived side by side, two old women dressed in black. We're almost the only ones left on the Rue d'Eglise. Most of the houses are abandoned, the thatched roofs half rotted away, shutters blowing open. No one wants to live here now. They choose modern houses on the outskirts of town, some many stories high. Walking up the stairs to the tops of those must be even harder than going up the hill I must climb.

An uneasy peace lies between us, as with two cats who must share the same hearth. We don't mention the past or talk about what might have been. But when Isabella smiles her old smile, it lights up her eyes, erasing her wrinkles, turning her into the girl I remember.

There is not much to shop for—the bread, a bit of meat, and a few carrots. Old bones don't need much nourishment. And there are not many chores to do. In the evenings I can sit at my window just as Isabella does, listening to the sounds of the night. The old hatreds seem dead. After all, we are the only ones left.

Then this morning, as I left to go to the market, I heard a faint call from Isabella's house. "Help! *Aidez-moi!* Help!"

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I drew closer, peering through the window to find its cause. Isabella lay on the floor, her eyes closed, blood forming a trail from the kitchen to where she lay. Clotted blood matted her hair. She must have tripped and hit her head on the table, then crawled toward the door for help. Only she could go no farther.

I think she sensed my presence because she raised her head as I stood there. "Maria? Are you there? Help! Help me!" Her eyes opened, searching fruitlessly in the darkness. Her voice was weak, with a hint of fear in it, just as in the half remembered cry from the woods that night so long ago. I looked at her lying alone and helpless. She'd die if I didn't call someone.

I should have felt pity. Indeed I should. There was my old enemy, at last laid low. A hint of a smile played about her lips. It reached her eyes, bringing back the Isabella of the past, the one who was free to play while I had to work. I remembered how lovely she was, how admired. And the children who filled her arms, especially the last one who should have been mine.

Suddenly I knew what I would do. I turned and left her where she lay.

That day I made the difficult journey to town twice. Anyone who watched will think we each made the trip. One old woman dressed in black looks much the same as another.

Her cries weaken as the day goes on. Soon they will cease. I will let another day pass to make sure. Then I will be free of her, free of her forever. Isabella's eyes will never mock me again.

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As the barn ruins came between Caleb and the bright afternoon sun, the blackness gave him the feeling of an eclipse. He wondered if this could be an omen—the eclipse of the past misfortunes in his life . . .

This fine first story (#607) was written by J. D. Carman of Fairhope, Alabama, who retired in 1975 "from a rather uneventful career as a self-taught mechanical engineer." From time to time during that career, he submitted short stories to various publications without success. "I became discouraged and, for many years, wrote very little (except poetry) until two years ago when I was prodded by family and friends to take a course in Creative Writing at the Institute of Lifelong Learning here in Fairhope. I became interested again and quite prolific in writing short stories. I submitted a number of them but without success—until now."

A warm welcome to you, Mr. Carman (we know you'll forgive the pun) . . .

SMELL OF BURNT WOOD

by J. D. CARMAN

Caleb Sloan came out of Robinson's Hardware and walked to his car. There was a police cruiser beside it, lights flashing.

"What did I do, Henry? Park too close to a police car?" said Caleb, smiling.

"I been trying to find you, Caleb. Got something bad to tell you." He paused as Caleb's grin turned sober. "Your barn caught fire about an hour ago—probably gone by now."

As Caleb put his hand on the door handle, Henry Jones continued,

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"Your neighbor, Sam Boone, called us and said you'd left around noon but you must still be in town because—"

Caleb didn't bother to thank him. He jumped into his car and burned rubber as he took off toward home.

As he neared the farm, the smell of burnt wood was in the air. Yes, the barn had surely burned. There wasn't much flame now, but huge billows of black smoke rose to smudge an otherwise blue sky.

As the barn ruins came between him and the bright afternoon sun, the blackness gave him the feeling of an eclipse. He wondered if this could be an omen—the eclipse of the past misfortunes in his life.

It had been a beautiful barn. He helped build it himself three years ago. Cost him $60,000. Before Cy Brenner wrote the insurance policy, he had said, "Better insure it for a hundred thousand, Caleb. They never pay a hundred percent loss these days." Now he was glad he had taken Cy's advice.

Caleb pulled up in the driveway and skidded to a stop. There were dozens of people standing around talking and waving their arms. He wondered if anyone had gotten the horses out. Only three of them were in there, but the way his horse-boarding-and-breeding business had gone this year, he couldn't afford to lose even one.

The two old pumpers weren't running very fast now. The firemen had managed to keep the fire contained so that it wouldn't get to the patch of long, dry weeds that led to the house. Caleb couldn't see too well through the smoke but it looked to him as if all that remained was water-soaked, charred timbers.

Friends and neighbors offered sympathy and help. "A bad thing, Caleb. If I can do anything—"

Someone interrupted, "Sure it's a bad thing. But maybe there *is* something we can do. We can help raise another barn."

"Sure am sorry, Caleb. But at least Sam Boone let the horses out."

When Stony Williams, the volunteer fire chief, came over Caleb asked, "What do you think started it?"

"Don't know yet. When the smoke clears a little, I'm going back in there to take a good look."

Caleb shook his head. "One minute you have a white tower—the next, a black junk pile." He motioned to the firemen. "Come into the house for coffee."

They seated themselves on each side of the long oak table in the center of the huge kitchen. The table would have a vase of flowers

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on it if Martha were still alive. Caleb set a plate of store cookies on the table. He looked at all the faces, then asked, "Where's Stony?"

"Oh, he's still out there nosing around, trying to figure how it started. You know, sometimes it's spontaneous combustion. But that usually happens in the hay mow—and Sam Boone said the flames started in the stable."

Another one said, "Stony's wasting his time. There's only a few square feet of wall left standing."

Just then Stony Williams came in. "I suppose the cookies are all gone."

They laughed and one said, good naturedly, "Sit down and shut up."

Stony sat and said, "Well, I figured out what started the fire."

Every cup clunked to the table. Every mouth stopped chewing. Someone said, "You're kidding. That barn is completely burned."

"Not quite," said Stony. "It was an arsonist, all right—and a clever one." He turned to Caleb. "You got some bad enemies?"

"I guess everyone has enemies. But I can't think of—"

Stony said, "It don't matter. We're gonna catch him."

"How?" Caleb asked.

"I guess he didn't want to be around when the fire started, so he rigged up a clever gadget. That little piece of wall that didn't burn was on the windward side. It has a window facing west. When things cleared, I noticed something strange on the window sill. But when I examined it, it wasn't strange at all. It was the lens from one of those old-fashioned flashlights—a magnifying type glass. It was propped there with some baling wire, at an angle to direct the sunlight through it to make a tiny, but very hot, spot on some straw in the stable and set it afire. I'm coming back tomorrow about the same time the fire started. See if I can prove my theory."

"O.K." somebody said, "but will you find the arsonist?"

"Oh, there are fingerprints on the lens and on the rest of the flashlight, which I also found."

One of the men said, "You gonna fingerprint everybody in the state?" and laughed.

Finally they all thanked Caleb for the coffee and left.

Caleb could hear them starting the pumper engines, and their personal cars. As he stood there staring at the table, his heart suddenly jumped. One cup was missing! The one he himself had held to pour coffee for Stony Williams.

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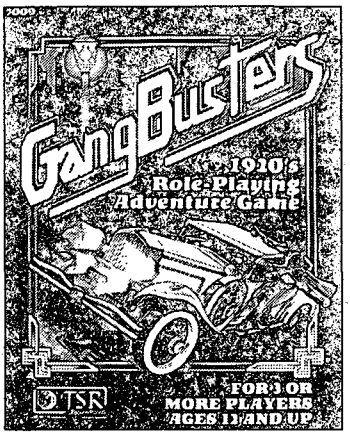

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

Glassy white, black splotches and stripes—a handsome hunk of nature. Roughly egg-shaped, with one flattish side—about twelve inches long, eight inches high—fifteen pounds, four ounces. The tapered ends would make good handles for cupping the hands around, raising it high, bringing it down—a fine killing rock . . .

The anatomy of two murders, a brilliant, burning look at human nature and its scenarios, and at the justice system; a murder case with overtones of Looking for Mr. Goodbar . . .

THE NAKED CAB DRIVER

by ROBERT TWOHY

Rose McCarthy woke up glad she felt good. Last night she'd taken a pill and was out by 8:30. Rain on the window then. Was it still raining? No, beyond the window was the start of a bright May morning. Lovely—she loved sunny Sundays.

Sunny Sunday afternoons particularly. She and Laura might lie by the pool, watching Bryan swim, dive, do pushups, handstands—it was nice to watch him work out. He was a lovely boy.

Pulling on her bathrobe and trotting to the kitchen, she did what she always did first thing—reached for the burglar-alarm switch by the stove. But her finger stopped—the switch was down, meaning off.

Meaning that Bryan had got up early as usual and switched off the alarm, because if you didn't and then opened a door, *yaaaa!*—you got a shriek straight from hell.

She winced, remembering the Saturday night, rather Sunday morning, two weeks ago—the naked man tearing down the hall

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toward her, eyes wild, face all bloody, tearing past her and out the front door, the alarm screaming *Yaaa.*

Horrible.

She trotted to the front door, flipped the two locks, went out for the paper, and lugged it back to the kitchen table. Then she went through the big living room to the wing, saw the patio door was open, and peered out to see if Bryan was taking an early swim. Negative. His door halfway down the wing was open, probably meaning he'd been out, gone back to his room to get something, and was going out again.

She passed the guest room and the bathroom, looked in his room and saw him by the bed—red gym pants and top, black gym shoes. He must have been out for a workout. Now on his knees, top half of him down on the bed—

She felt a twinge. Why? A boy kneels to say a prayer, dozes off—why not?

She shrugged off the twinge, padded on up the wing, past the den, to the end door, Laura's room.

There she paused. Something was different—what? Her glance focused on the low table outside the door, where Laura's favorite rock sat among ferns—only it didn't. There were only the ferns.

The twinge was sharp. She took a breath. *Nothing's wrong.* Laura had simply moved the rock. But why would she?

Rose tapped on the door. No sleepy, childlike "Yah, whuh?" from Laura. So what? She was still sleeping.

Nothing's wrong.

Rose turned the knob and went into Laura's pink-and-gold bedroom.

Hands over face, turning, stumbling, then falling—

Cheek down on the gold rug—Laura's bed—don't look there! Rose got to the door, started down the wing, fell against the glass wall, and went down again. Hands and knees, away from Laura's room, Laura's bed—Bryan! What would she tell Bryan?

"Bryan?" Her voice creaked but it was loud enough. Why didn't he move, turn to her? "Bryan?"

He stayed on his knees, top half of him down on the bed.

Detective Burmiller, Sheriff's Department, got a notion he'd play dumb cop, like on a TV show. Morrill was asking the questions and Burmiller wanted a role. So he prowled the grubby apartment, picking up things, grunting when the cab driver asked if he was looking

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for anything in particular, barked at one point, "Any objection I look in this bureau?" The cab driver shrugged. Burmiller opened a top drawer, pawed around, and under wadded underclothes found a key.

Wagged it, asked what it was to.

The cab driver, Tyler, said he didn't know. His voice wasn't right, or his eyes—they had a sort of muddy look all of a sudden. Dumb cop might have lucked onto something.

He asked the question again, harder. The cab driver closed his eyes, whispered, "This isn't real, it isn't happening. I tossed that key. It couldn't have got in that drawer."

The detectives took him to Pine City, twelve miles south of Lindenvale, to the County Courthouse, Sheriff's Department, third floor. They put a lot of questions to him and had some things checked—then arrested him, took him up to the fourth-floor county jail, and booked him on suspicion of two murders.

But if Tyler had used the key to get into Laura Payne's house the night of May 21st, *wouldn't* he have tossed it?

Josten, the deputy D.A. who would prosecute (the calendar on his desk said July 11th and the Tyler case hadn't even made the Criminal Calendar yet), asked himself that—then flashed on a case in Berkeley in the mid-Fifties.

Burton Abbott had kidnaped, murdered, and buried a schoolgirl—her school books turned up in his basement. He denied knowledge of them or how they'd got there—but there they sat on the evidence table through his trial. He got gas.

Tyler could have kept the key to fondle in secret, gloat over—to relive the night of May 21st, when he'd proved to himself that far from being just a run-of-the-herd klutz, a nothing cab driver, he was one of a special breed, One Who Dared Kill. Which no one would know—no one but him.

Burton Abbott, Clayton Tyler—keepers of tokens for their private reveries?

From the stack of stuff on his desk, Josten picked up a photograph of a rock.

Glassy white, black splotches and stripes—a handsome hunk of nature. Roughly egg-shaped, with one flattish side—about twelve inches long, eight inches high—fifteen pounds, four ounces. The tapered ends would make good handles for cupping the hands around, raising it high, bringing it down—a fine killing rock.

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It had been found in the deep end of Laura Payne's swimming pool.

Its knobs and jags matched wounds in Laura Payne's wrecked profile. The flattish side could fit Bryan Payne's forehead, crushed straight across. There was not much blood from Bryan's smashed head, there was a lot from Laura's. The medical opinion was that Bryan was struck once, Laura at least three times, maybe more.

The murders were done about midnight, May 21st. There had been no break-in. The windows were shut, the front door was on the bolt, and the garage doors were locked. No one could have got in the door beyond the housekeeper Rose McCarthy's room, which was beyond the kitchen. The patio door was wide open. It had a chain, but if the chain was off that night—as it had to have been—someone with a key had access.

Which of the two he had killed first was speculation. Josten's scenario had Bryan killed first, Laura a minute or so later.

He looked at photos of Laura as she had been before the rock. A beautiful woman, a golden woman. Not after. Oh no, not after.

Smashed as she slept on her left side, under pink covers, head on the pillow, in a pink nightgown. Dead before the second blow came down.

There was no disorder in the bedroom. The killer had slipped in, positioned himself, smashed down on her. Again. Again. Maybe more. Then he'd slipped out, shut the door, gone down the wing to the patio door, tossed the rock in the pool—

Why? Fingerprints? The rock was too rough-textured for prints. But the killer needn't have known that. Still why not just wipe it on the pink blanket, leave it? Why carry it out and toss it in the pool?

Josten shrugged, knowing that in a murder case you're not going to get all the answers. He thought he had enough answers to back up two charges of first degree—which, if he convinced the jury, could mean gas for Clayton Tyler.

Who had no alibi. He hadn't worked May 21st. Just about every Saturday night off, he drank and shot pool at Pete's Place, a dump in downtown Lindenvale two blocks from his apartment, staying till closing. Which he hadn't on May 21st. On May 21st he'd left Pete's before ten—the bartender and others there said he'd sat by himself, with a broody look. He said he'd gone home, drunk beer, watched TV—but he couldn't recall details of any of the programs he said he'd watched.

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A guy said that about 11:30 he'd seen Tyler's raunchy '64 Galaxie wagon, white with a red top, turning off El Camino onto Castle Drive, which leads up into the Hills.

The guy was a drinker, like Tyler, but sober that night, as far as was known, and no reason was turned up why he'd lie. And anyone who knew Tyler's old clunker couldn't mistake it, or so Morrill and Burmiller had told Josten.

So he'd use the guy—if when the trial came he wasn't on a drunk.

Josten picked up Rose McCarthy's statement, made to the detectives Sunday May 22nd, commencing 9:20 A.M.

She said the murder rock had come from the table outside Laura's door, that Laura liked rocks for decoration—she had a set-up in the living room, another in the dining room.

Morrill asked if Laura had any enemies? Or Bryan?

Rose balked. Why couldn't she be let go peacefully, without bad talk following her?

Would bad talk follow her?

Rose didn't want to say.

Morrill, experienced and able, gently got it through to her that she must tell everything she knew.

She said that for a year Laura had been driving off in her Mercedes, nights when Bryan wasn't home. She'd be gone all night sometimes. Other times, late at night, she'd bring a man home. When that happened it was by cab—she never drove drunk. The next day Rose would fire up her old Pontiac and drive Laura to whichever bar in Lindenvale or Bel Carlos she'd left the Mercedes.

Morrill asked how Rose knew Laura brought men home.

Because, Rose said, she'd wake, peek around the shade, and there'd be a cab in the drive, motor purring, Laura and a man would get out, and the cab would back away up the drive. Maybe a dozen times the past year Rose had seen that.

The same man? No, different. Each time Rose saw, he was different.

What kind of men? Bums.

What did she mean? Crummy clothes. Nobodies. Though she didn't see the men clear every time—some nights there was no moon.

Would she see the men in the morning? Sometimes for a second or two. Early, around dawn, she'd hear a motor—a cab again. And from the front door the latest bum would slide.

It seemed Laura got rid of her guests early. Waking them probably, thought Josten, telling them it was time to go—walking to the

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kitchen, switching off the alarm, calling a cab, putting the guy out the door. Drunk, at night, she wanted him—not in the morning, hung over.

Rose rambled. She told how she'd lived and worked for Laura for eight years, since the family had moved from the City to the Peninsula. Mr. Payne was in poor health then—an older man in his mid-sixties, Laura in her late thirties. But she'd loved him, Rose was sure. He'd been a kind man, and handsome—sort of elegant. And he'd tried to stay bright and funny and sort of elegant while he was dying. He'd died four years ago. While he was alive, Laura hadn't gone manhunting. In fact, as far as Rose knew, that had only started about a year ago.

Had anything unusual happened a year ago? Not that Rose knew.

Josten had learned background stuff. From the late Fifties and into the Sixties, Laura Winters had been a showgirl, then a cashier, in Vegas. Harold Payne, large-caliber San Francisco financier, enjoyer of high stakes, women, and fun in general, had met and married Laura in '64. Bryan was born in '65. They'd had a mansion in Pacific Heights. There was no information that after their marriage either of them had played around. Everything seemed to have been harmony, in the SF years and later on the Peninsula—a loving couple, loving parents. No one said different.

Had Rose talked to Laura about her new thing of bringing men home? Yes, they were friends. Rose had asked Laura what she was doing to herself.

Rose told the detectives, "She'd look at me with those big eyes, so blue, so troubled, and say, 'I have peace for a while. For a little while. Till it comes again, the hunger—do you understand?' "

Rose guessed she did. Josten guessed he did, too. It wasn't hard to figure. A beautiful woman, in her prime, submerged since becoming a widow, the old needs surfacing—reaching out for men. (Why bums? Why not? It would be simpler that way—quick, no ambiguities. Over and done with.)

Bryan didn't know what was happening. He was absorbed in his own preparation for life—he was a top student at Lindenvale High, a top athlete (basketball guard, Conference gymnastics champ)—no doping, no drinking, no girl friends yet, no time for that. All the good things were ahead of him.

Josten studied the death photo, thinking, When you say prayers at bedtime, aren't you ready for bed?

Maybe he hadn't been praying. Maybe he'd knelt to look for some-

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thing under the bed and someone had slid in the door. Startled, the boy raised his head and the rock came down over him, crushing his forehead.

Why was he in gym clothes? That wasn't unusual, Rose said—he'd wear them around the house sometimes. He said they were comfortable, he liked wearing them.

Was Bryan religious? Well, he belonged to a church group at school, mostly athletes. They had a camp at LaHonda and he'd go there for a weekend, fairly frequent. They'd hike, do sports, have discussions, that sort of thing—he had a lot of friends in the group, he liked going there.

Friday, May 6th, Bryan was going to camp. But his '78 Pinto had transmission woes, so a friend picked him up. The friend had a little sister, a tomboy in the old phrase, a tree-climbing fool—

Josten leaned back in his chair, fingering his neat black beard. If the little sister hadn't climbed a tree next day, the Saturday—but she did, and lost her hold—

Sometimes a totally unrelated event has to occur, causing another event, causing another, before murder can occur.

Josten got back to the facts. Friday, May 6th. Bryan goes off with his friend, to be gone until Sunday—or so he plans, and so Laura believes.

Saturday evening, May 7th, Laura fixes herself up in her huntress clothes, smiles brightly and tightly at Rose, says she might be back late, maybe not till morning, gives the usual instructions: "Check the doors and windows, turn on the alarm, and don't worry. I'm doing what I have to do now. It's not a good time for me, but I'll get through it, it'll pass."

Rose watches the Mercedes glide up the long drive, checks the front locks and the windows, puts the chain on the patio door, and turns on the alarm. Has slices from a cold roast and a piece of chocolate pie, considers another, decides against it, and has it anyway. She watches TV, doesn't feel well, takes a pill, and goes to bed. It's a few minutes past nine.

She wakes up to a motor purring in the drive. The clock shows 1:33. She peeks around the shade. It's a red cab. Red is Metro Cab from Bel Carlos. She sees Laura get out and stumble. The lights of the cab go out and the motor goes silent. Rose watches the driver get out.

Laura falls into him. He holds her up and helps her out of sight

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around the garage. Laura is drunk, but she's never forgotten to switch off the alarm.

Josten had learned about the two switches—when you flip down the outside switch, the one in the kitchen flips down, and vice versa. The system is wired to the Lindenvale Police Department.

Sergeant Morrill asked if Rose had seen other men go with Laura around the garage. It was hard to tell, she said. It depended on if there was a moon. If not, it was hard to see if the man went with her or waited in the drive. Sometimes she'd see them waiting. A few times, one had gone around the garage with Laura, Rose thought—she wasn't sure. But May 8th, 1:40 A.M., was full moon and she was sure the cab driver had gone with her around the garage.

So he knew where the alarm switch was.

"They came back," Rose said. "She was wobbly, leaning on him. They walked past my window down the walk to the front door."

Then what?

"I heard her in the kitchen, fixing drinks." It was then that Laura must have turned the alarm back on. "She was stumbling some. Then it was quiet. I went to sleep."

Then what?

"I woke up—there was shouting, banging around. I heard her scream. It was two-forty. I got up and put on my robe and went through the living room—"

Wasn't she frightened?

"Sure. But she was screaming, there was yelling and banging. I was starting into the wing and the guy ran out her door, naked, all hunched up, his face all bloody, his eyes crazy. His arms were full of clothes. Bryan was behind him, yelling, trying to grab him. I thought, this is crazy, Bryan's at camp, but there he was, in his pajamas, running after the guy. I stood still. The guy dodged around me, Bryan piled into me, and we went down all in a tangle—then the alarm system went off. Bryan pushed up, yelled, 'He was hurting Mom!' and ran to the door and out. The alarm was still screaming. When I got to the door, Bryan was standing in the drive and the cab was scooting away."

She had run to the kitchen and cut the alarm. Then things were a bad dream—Laura in her bathrobe, drunk, staggering, weeping. Bryan staring, pulling away as she reached for him, running out the door and up the drive. The phone ringing, a neighbor asking are things all right? Rose saying yes, everything's fine. Laura screaming, "I'm not bad, I'm not!" and passing out, falling with a thud, just

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as a Lindenvale cop car pulls up. Laura on the living-room floor, her robe falling away from her, Rose hustling to get her decent, cops helping get her on the couch, Rose telling them how Laura had drunk a little too much and then opening the door for some air.

Bryan was away four days. Laura told Rose, "He's at his friend's. It's best. I've tried hard not to but I've hurt him."

When Bryan came back he'd sat with Rose, told her how that night he'd heard noises, odd noises, and gone to see that Laura was all right, opened her door. He thought the man had come in the window, a criminal, a rapist. Later, seeing the cab, he'd realized what the scene he'd walked in on must add up to, and he had run from her in horror, wanting to never see her again. But he'd been wrong. She was his mother, he loved her—

Laura had come in the kitchen where they were talking and Bryan had gone to her and kissed her, and they'd cried together. Rose told the detectives how she'd thought that maybe the horrible night was what had to happen—so Laura could see by Bryan's eyes how sick she'd got. So Rose thought maybe now it was over, the sickness was over.

And it had seemed so. There had been no more drinking, no more prowling, no more cabs for ten more days. Until the morning of May 22nd, when she'd found Laura and Bryan dead.

Rose described the cab driver. "Tall, sandy hair, about thirty." The detectives went to Metro Cab office and learned that she had described Clayton Tyler, a night driver, who had taken Monday and Tuesday off, May ninth and tenth, and then showed up May eleventh with a lumpy face and a yellowish black eye, saying he'd been in a bar brawl and didn't want to talk about it.

The detectives looked over his trip sheet for May seventh and found that his last trip was a pickup at Club AhHah, a dump on Sixth Street in Bel Carlos—destination 148 Chandler, Lindenvale Hills.

The dispatcher knew that address. He said that the night drivers would talk about the lady, how they'd take her home, or to a motel, with some sleazy guy or other. She was getting a rep in the cruddy underparts of Lindenvale and Bel Carlos—a beautiful high-style lush, a nympho. The dispatcher had never heard any of the drivers brag that they'd lucked out.

The detectives went to talk to Tyler—and Burmiller had found the key.

Josten thought about what he had. Nothing rock-solid. There were

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some questions he didn't have answers to. But he had the main things: the key, the outside alarm switch, a motive (revenge on Bryan, swelling into a frenzy that smashed Laura), a recorded act of violence in his past, and no alibi for the night of May 21–22.

But he was far from complacent. Tyler's defender was Joe Marcum. Josten didn't like him but knew his persuasiveness. He would pick away at the soft parts in Josten's case and score some points. But Josten had the cards going in–it was his case to win or lose. If he made no dumb moves he should win.

Not only the evidence but his gut told him Tyler was guilty.

In a nothing brown sweater, pants the same, Tyler's court-appointed defender, Marcum, looked a little like a street lawyer as played by Judd Hirsch—not much, but a little. Rangy build, rough-cut features, crooked smile.

Two metal folding chairs in the 6′ x 8′ conference room—slime-colored walls, chipped linoleum floor, no window except a small one in the steel door. The deputy who brought Marcum told him to rap when he wanted out.

He sized up his client—steady brown eyes, okay face, a good build as far as you could tell in his baggy orange jail rompers. Curried, combed, and dressed like an adult, he'd make a not bad appearance.

Marcum needed a defense. He didn't know where it lay yet. He slouched in a chair and paged a black notebook. "You've been in jail before."

"A couple of times." Voice low, an edge of nervousness but not sounding tight or tinny. "One time for unpaid tickets, once for drunk in public."

"Once for assault," Marcum reminded him.

Eyes closed a few seconds, then they were steady again on Marcum's. "I thought you meant *this* jail. Right—Sacramento. Eight years ago. I was twenty-three, a complete punk."

Marcum had learned that the assault victim had lived with Tyler briefly, then broke the connection. He'd laid for her with a pipe-wrench, smashed up her face, put her in the hospital. Three charges were dropped, he copped to assault, and did a year in Sacramento County Jail.

"I never got in a rage like that again."

Josten would say same guy, same rage, on simmer eight years, boiling over—the lust to smash, to hurt, to pay back for humiliation,

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real or fancied. Josten would work the Sacramento assault for all it was worth, which could be a lot.

Marcum riffled some pages. "You were in the Navy during Vietnam. Honorable discharge. What'd you do before the Navy?"

"High school, Minnesota."

"Relatives?"

"I'm an orphan. My grandfather raised me. He's dead."

"How long have you been in California?"

"Nine years."

"Lindenvale?"

"Six years."

"Cab driver all that time?"

"Yeah."

"Ever married?"

"No."

Marcum considered what he had. A drinker, sometimes a drunk. Psychological exam revealed no abnormalities—what's a psych exam worth? No kin, no close friends—if he got gas, or prison for life, who'd care? Maybe some bartenders, for a few minutes— "Why'd you keep the key?"

"I didn't. I mean, I thought I'd tossed it." His laugh was rusty, not much used lately. "I got it by accident in the first place. I didn't know I had it till two or three days after."

"After what?"

"After I got it."

"When was that?"

"When I was at her place—on May seventh."

"Tell me about that."

"I told the cops."

"I know."

Tyler was quiet a few beats. Then, "She got her key ring out of her purse and was scratching around—"

"You're talking about when you got to the front door?"

"Yeah."

"After she'd switched off the alarm."

"Yeah."

"She was scratching around at the lock—" Marcum prompted.

"Two locks—two keys. I took the ring from her and got the door open. She almost fell, I grabbed her. We went in the living room, she bolted the front door, then she went to the kitchen and made some drinks and brought them back. I pulled out my cigarettes, and

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keys went sailing all over the place—I'd shoved the ring in my pocket when I grabbed her and it'd come apart. We picked up the keys, six or seven of them. She said the patio-door key was missing. We looked under the furniture, figured it had hid itself like they do sometimes. I emptied my pocket, turned it inside out—no key. She said no problem, it'd turn up, she had dupes anyway. I forgot about it until two or three days later when I found it in my pocket."

Marcum nodded, looked off a few seconds. When Laura Payne didn't find the key next day, what did she think? Anything? Did she connect the loss of the key with Tyler? Maybe she'd forgotten details of the night before. Maybe she'd wanted to forget details of the night before. Maybe she had gotten a dupe and put it on the ring and that was that. Who could figure what she'd thought, done? The only thing clear was that she hadn't mentioned the lost key to Rose McCarthy and she hadn't changed the patio-door lock. All that was needed was that she remember to put the chain on—which she hadn't, and Bryan hadn't, the night of May 21st.

"What did you think when you found it?"

"That it'd got caught in my cigarettes when I pulled them out—then when I put them back, it slipped out and mixed in with the change and other junk in my pocket."

Josten wouldn't argue. He wouldn't care how Tyler had gotten the key—just that he'd got it, and kept it. "So you tossed it, or thought you did?"

"I tossed it in the garbage bag—didn't notice I'd missed." Rueful smile. "Drunk at the time, probably."

"How did it get in the drawer?"

"I dunno. Sometimes I see something on the floor, pick it up, stick it somewhere—don't even know I've done it, I'm thinking of something else."

But the key hadn't been just stuck in the drawer. Burmiller had said it was at the back, under the underwear.

Could have got shoved back there when Tyler had put fresh underwear in— Marcum looked at his notes. "Let's go back to the beginning. At about one o'clock that night you got a call to Club AhHah and picked up Laura Payne. Did you know her?"

"No, but I'd heard about her."

"From other drivers, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"You picked her up, she was alone, and you drove her home. Did she sit in front?"

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"Yeah."

"Come on strong?"

"I thought so. She got close, smiled up at me, fiddled with my hand on the wheel. Asked if I'd like to come in for a drink."

"You thought she meant more than a drink."

"Yeah."

"What'd you do?"

"Called in I'd be out of service for a while, turned off the motor, the lights, got out and helped her out and around the garage. She said she had to switch off the burglar alarm so she wouldn't wake the housekeeper and bring the cops down."

"So you knew the housekeeper was home. Did you know the son was home?"

"I didn't know there was a son."

"She hadn't mentioned him?"

"No."

Nobody had known the son was home—except the son. Rose McCarthy hadn't known, Laura hadn't. If she had, Tyler wouldn't have been asked in.

Marcum got up, walked one step to the wall, three to the door. A passing deputy raised his eyebrows—Marcum shook his head, walked back. "So you went in the living room and threw the keys around. Then what?"

"We had a couple of drinks. Then we were back in her bedroom—"

"Had you noticed the rock?"

"I dunno—I don't think so."

"The D.A. will say you did. He'll say that when you found the key and realized you had a way back into the house, you remembered it—and used it."

Tyler took some breaths, his eyes steady on Marcum's. "Realized I had a way back in? I never wanted a way back in. But if I had, I'd have thought of those extra locks. The front door needed two keys, why wouldn't the patio door?"

"It didn't. It had a chain. The chain was off that night."

"Why?"

"They got careless."

"How would I have known that?"

Marcum was quiet, thinking how Josten might counter. Tyler was a drinker. Drinkers fantasize. He had the key, knew where the alarm switch was, knew where the rock was, wanted his fantasy to become real—blocked out thoughts of extra locks or chains. He'd been hu-

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miliated, rage had boiled. Josten would focus on vengeance, the ecstasy of vengeance.

Tyler seemed to pick up on Marcum's thought. "Revenge, huh? That's supposed to be my motive?" He had a bleak smile. "I get beat up, so I kill two people." He shook his head. "I've been beat up before. Know what I do? I stay away—lie doggo. I want nothing to do with the guy."

Which missed the point, thought Marcum—not necessarily on purpose, but missed it. The point wasn't getting beat up. It was humiliation, being chased naked into the night, from a lady's bed.

Motive, he told Tyler, wasn't the crucial thing, anyway—the key was. Without it, there probably was no case; with it, there was very much a case. Because *someone* had gotten in that door—and Tyler had had a key.

Tyler said, "Someone else did, too."

"Who?"

"One of the other guys she took home."

It was possible. Anyone could have grabbed a dupe. Marcum walked around. For some reason he flashed on the rock.

He'd seen it in the evidence room, had cupped his hands around the tapered ends and hefted it, had pictured it raised high, coming down. A boy's forehead couldn't take that, a woman's profile couldn't.

She'd been savaged. The boy hadn't been. The girl in Sacramento had been. Tyler had gone for her pretty face. The Payne killer had gone for Laura's beautiful face, and kept going for it.

Josten would say that killing the boy hadn't cooled Tyler's rage. The opposite—it raised it to a frenzy. He'd stridden down the wing to Laura's room. Then, the rage spent, he had tossed the bloody rock into the pool. Did he have blood on him? If so, maybe he'd splashed his hands or his shirt in the pool. They'd checked his clothes, and checked the Galaxie and found no bloodstains. But he'd had hours to clean up himself, his clothes, and his car.

Tyler's voice brought Marcum back to now. "What are you thinking?"

Marcum sat. "Nothing useful. Let's get back to May seventh. You're in Laura's room, and Bryan's in his room—which you don't know and Laura doesn't know. Do you know the story on that, why he was home?"

"Some—I'm not too clear. Something about, he was supposed to be at this camp in LaHonda."

Marcum nodded. "A guy had driven him there. The guy's mother

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called camp Saturday evening to tell him his sister was in the hospital, so the guy drove back and Bryan came with him. They saw the sister, then the friend drove Bryan home. That was about ten o'clock. The housekeeper had taken a pill and didn't hear him. He'd have switched off the alarm, come in quiet, and switched it back on. When you got there with Laura, about one-thirty, he was in his room asleep. So you didn't see him or hear him, and she didn't. O.K., you're in her bedroom. What happens?"

"Somebody grabs me." Tyler was looking at the sickly wall, like seeing the scene there. "I'm thrown sideways. I see her staring over my head. She's screaming, 'No, you're not here—you can't be!' I'm on the floor, I don't know what's happening. I'm getting kicked. I get up. I'm punched around, slammed into something, go over a chair. My clothes are there on the floor. I scoop them up, run out, down the hall. He's after me, yelling. I don't know who he is and I don't care—I just want out.

"I see a little lady in a bathrobe at the end of the hall. I dodge around her and run to the front door. The damn thing won't open. I pull at it and see it's bolted, twist the bolt, open the door—and there's a scream like hell's busted loose. How great can things get?

"I run to the cab, throw my clothes on the seat, hop in, and get started. The alarm's still screaming and the guy's running toward me. I lay rubber up the drive, get on Chandler, head for Castle, then think no, the cops'll come up Castle, turn off Chandler, side-road it down to town, pulling my clothes on. I'm bleeding all over the place, half knocked out, pull up at my apartment and get upstairs. That's it. That's what happened from the time I picked her up at the AhHah till about three o'clock Sunday morning, when I got home."

Marcum looked at his watch, went to the door, rapped with a coin on the steel, and turned back. "I'll get back to you in a few days."

Tyler nodded, smiled. "Know who you remind me of?"

"Who?"

"Judd Hirsch. Remember that show?"

"Yeah."

"It was a good show. I liked that guy."

Marcum nodded acknowledgment. He didn't say, "I'm not Judd Hirsch, and this isn't a TV show where the good guy can't lose. I'm not even sure you're a good guy. Should I check with the girl in Sacramento?"

He drove to a neat house in a tract on the hill west of Pine City.

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A little woman named Jen lived there with him and their children, a girl named Buff and a boy named Paul.

While Jen considered what to fix for supper, Marcum walked with the children in a little park nearby, where they had a talk about squirrels, which they all thought A-Number One in every way. The children wanted to know how they were so good at running a telephone wire. Marcum said they learned to use their tails for balance. He was just guessing. He wasn't an expert on squirrels.

They talked about other things they saw in the park, and it was a good hour. Then they walked back to the house and supper.

Which was split-pea soup, toasted-cheese openfacers, and instant pudding—green-and-brown layers, a hit. Then a Charlie Brown on TV; then Marcum read the boy a story about a weasel who wanted to be popular and so learned to do likeable things. The girl was in bed by then, having fallen asleep. He'd carried her there, tucked her in and kissed her. He kissed the boy and left, thinking it was nice the children had been born in an age of Fathers Who Took Time To Show They Cared—nice for one particular father, that was for sure.

He sat at the wobbly redwood table outside the back door and looked over his estate, which was wispy and pretty raggedy, needing a mow—but sort of touching in the pale moonlight. Jen brought coffee and he told her how his first meeting with Tyler had gone. She knew the case from newspaper stories and they had talked about it when Marcum had learned he'd be Tyler's defender. "What's he like?"

"He looks okay." He told her some of the things he and Tyler had talked about, including the patio door, where the chain hadn't been on the night of the murders.

"Was that unusual?" she asked.

"The housekeeper can't say. When she was alone in the house she'd put it on—otherwise she was always in bed first and that door was Laura's or Bryan's territory. She assumed they always put the chain on, but maybe they didn't. She thought they were careful. But they weren't that night."

"How would the killer know the chain would be off?"

"He wouldn't. But maybe it was off a lot of nights." Anyway, he thought, coincidence doesn't gain much with a jury. As Josten would point out, with examples, they happen.

"Did Josten check out any of the other men Laura brought home?"

"Yeah, he ran some down. Some had alibis, some didn't—but no

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other keys turned up, and Bryan hadn't punched anyone else out, so Tyler's the only suspect."

The jury would see the death photos and want to serve justice. Serve justice what? Those photos yelled for a scalp. And since there were no others, Tyler's would do fine.

Marcum finished his coffee and offered the thought that maybe it was bedtime—with a certain inflection. She gave him a certain look back. They got up and went inside, he shutting the back door and locking it. They went to look at their children, then down the hall to their bedroom.

She said, "The rock in the pool."

He turned off the light, causing moonlight in the room. "I dunno." He didn't want to think about the rock. Away with the rock. Away with the key, the door chain, the alarm switch, all the things around the edges of death. Away with death. Let there be life, while there was. Let there be life and love.

Soft waves. The ocean. No, a swimming pool. The water was pink, getting pinker. Good—get the red out.

She sat by the pool at a table. Who? Not Jen. Blonde, blue eyes, lovely.

Something deep in the pool. He went under. Glassy white, black splotches and streaks—beautiful. She liked rocks, she had them in the house—now one was in the pool.

Rocks are good to touch. Is there a word tactility? Rocks have tactility. He reached to it. *Don't,* it said. *I'm a killer.*

Marcum was startled. The rock smiled. *I could tell you things.* But Marcum couldn't hear more. He called, *Louder please.*

I'm bad, but not as bad as they say.

Food on the table, a platter of fruits and meats and cheeses and all kinds of stuff. She hunched and with both hands shoved food in her face. Hands and cheeks streaked, food stuck in her blonde hair. He wanted her to stop being disgusting and to be beautiful again. He reached for her. She pushed him away. *No no no—get thee to a nunnery. No, get me to a nunnery. Get thee to a gymnasium.*

I'm not a gymnast.

A gymnast could get up on the roof. She began to laugh, a harsh, desperate sound. *You think you're you. You're not. None of you are anything. All you are is a Chinese dinner.* Marcum saw that the food on the platter had become a Chinese dinner. She flung it all in the pool, then put her face in sticky hands and wept.

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Marcum was running. After him, a long low thing like a weasel came dark and sleek, teeth and bright eyes, *her* blue eyes. He was running by the pool. He had on red gym clothes. She whispered, *It has to be, it always had to be, don't you see that? You see it—you're just pretending to run.*

The rock came to the top and laughed. *I'm only half bad,* it said, and went back down.

Marcum leaped to grip the gutter on the edge of the roof with both hands, swung like a pendulum sideward, got his feet up on the roof, rolled his hips, was on the roof, and steadied himself there. He was safe.

The weasel came over the top of the roof. *Trust your mother, she loves you. Oh, how she loves you!*

You'll destroy us, said Marcum.

One of us will. Or both of us. She wasn't a weasel. She was Laura, radiant, golden, reaching.

Marcum was up in bed. He'd heard a cry, "Yes, yes!" The cry hung in front of him like a puff of grey smoke, then became Jen's face, those were Jen's arms around him. She was making soft sounds and he knew it had been only a dream, whatever a dream was.

He lay against her soft warmth and was glad he didn't have to be stalwart right now. He could be scared and shivery, a small boy drawing comfort. Is that what every man is under the baloney—a small boy wanting to be held lovingly?

When he stopped shaking they got up and went to the kitchen. She heated water for coffee. The stove clock said almost 4:00.

He told her the dream as she poured coffee. "It must have come out of doubts about the door chain. Going out, Laura would tell the housekeeper to check the doors. She never forgot the alarm switch. She'd bolted the front door before taking Tyler back to the bedroom. No matter how drunk she was, it seems she'd remember the locks and the alarm. Why not the chain? Why would she forget it on May twenty-first, sober? Why would Bryan forget it? If they didn't forget it, no one got in, key or no key. Not Tyler, not anyone."

He chewed coffee, worked on a thought. Bryan, kneeling in prayer. Why in gym clothes? Because he liked wearing them, Rose McCarthy had said—he was proud and glad to wear them, he was a champion. Yes, and for the ultimate event in his young life, Marcum said, mightn't he rather wear them than anything else?"

"What event?" Jen asked.

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"His death."

He sketched her a scene. "He's smashed Laura. He leaves the rock on the bed, goes to the kitchen, switches off the alarm, goes back, gets the rock, goes out the patio door, tosses the rock in the pool, and dives in himself—washing away blood. Then, walking through the rain to his room, he puts on his gym clothes—his funeral clothes—goes out, swings up on the roof, and dives onto the patio. Is that possible? To smash his head in, then get up, walk inside, and kneel by his bed before he dies?"

"I think it is. I think I've read of things like that."

He gave a laugh that had no meaning—just nerves. "The rock said it was only half bad. Meaning it had killed Laura, but not him?"

"Why did he kill Laura?"

"*If* he did. Remember this is just a dream." He reached for more coffee. "Why? Atonement?"

She said slowly, "To keep the sin from happening?"

He was quiet, watching her. She said, "An innocent, becoming a man—a beautiful man. She saw that happening. She began to have thoughts, urges—hated them and tried to get rid of them with other men. Your dream pulled that stale old joke, the Chinese dinner, where a half hour after you finish, you're hungry. That was Laura. She couldn't stop her hunger for her beautiful son."

She was quiet a little, then she added, "Maybe nothing happened between them. Maybe Bryan just dreamed it, wanted it to happen, hated his thoughts, hated her for what he thought were *her* thoughts. Maybe he prowled around in the hall in torment, fixed on the rock, thought, I can save us. Maybe that was it."

He went to see Josten. They put on their "I don't like you much but here we are" smiles, Marcum's crooked, Josten's thin in his neat black beard. Marcum sat and got out his notebook. "I was browsing at the library and came on six cases where people had fatal injuries and didn't act like it. One guy went to a cocktail party and stood around for a half hour with a pleasant smile, not saying anything, then fell over. He had a bullet in his head. He should have died on the spot, which was six blocks away."

Josten picked up a pencil, ran the point through his beard, and kept listening.

Marcum closed the notebook. "What if the chain was on the patio door?"

"That's what you're saying?"

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"Speculating."

"If it was on, Tyler wouldn't have gotten in."

"I don't think he did, or anyone else."

Josten horizontaled the pencil between his forefingers, sighted over it at the enemy.

Marcum laid out his and Jen's scenarios, their several versions, both ending the same—with Bryan smashing Laura, then diving onto the patio. Josten heard him through, his expression not showing what he thought, or if he thought anything. Then he said, "Is that what you'll go with?"

"It's about all I've got. But you don't have a lot, either. The key, and some other stuff that won't come to much if the key doesn't. Which it doesn't, if the chain was on. So it boils down to, was it on or not? You say no, I say yes. We have no evidence either way. All each of us has is an assumption."

Josten thought, stalemate. I give *my* scenario, he gives his, then the judge instructs: if you find the defense's alternative as plausible as the prosecution's case, you must find for the defendant. *Must* find.

Plausibility. Was it plausible that Bryan got up after smashing his forehead in and walked back into the house? Marcum would cite parallels, and he could be persuasive—he could make it plausible to a jury. Maybe his theory had some holes, but Josten couldn't see any right now. If he didn't find any, Tyler was going to walk.

He got up, smiled. "I'll think it over."

Marcum smiled back.

The last day of July he sat with Tyler in the big coffee shop under the courthouse. Tyler looked good, in neat jacket and slacks, shaved, his hair combed. He was pallid, but a week in the August sun would take care of that.

Tyler said, "I had feelings the first minute I saw you. Judd Hirsch, remember? I still don't know what you did."

"I gave him another thought."

"You mean that someone else could have done it?"

Marcum nodded.

"So today they cut me loose for insufficient evidence. But it was sufficient to keep me there for two months." He shook his head and got a wry smile from Marcum. "Am I kicking? It's over. I'm grateful." His brown eyes were steady on Marcum.

Marcum watched him drink coffee and wondered why he felt not

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with this scene. He should feel positive, expansive, but he didn't. Something was wrong.

"They could still pick me up again on this, couldn't they?"

"If they got more evidence."

"Like what?"

Marcum got a jolt. Not at the words, at the tone—a tinny ring.

He looked at Tyler hard. The eyes weren't right. They looked muddy.

But just for a second. Tyler looked down into his coffee, raised the cup, looked over the rim at him, and the brown eyes were clear again.

"Thanks. What else can I say? Just thanks." The tone was back in a good place.

They stood. Marcum took the hand held across the table at him, got up a smile, and watched him walk away toward the elevators.

Saw him look to the side, stop. Saw Morrill and Burmiller, Sheriff's Department, at a table near, looking at Tyler without expression. Marcum couldn't see Tyler's expression. After a few seconds, Tyler turned and walked on to the elevators.

Marcum walked over to the detectives, nodded, and sat, though he wasn't asked to.

Burmiller was watching an elevator door close behind Tyler. He murmured, "Man's got a date. With somebody. A woman probably. She maybe doesn't even know him yet."

Morrill said, "You did a good job. He was lucky to get you."

"Somebody's daughter," Burmiller murmured.

"Everybody should have a smart lawyer when they get in a mess."

"He doesn't like pretty women. He does, but then he doesn't. I wonder why he gets this urge to wreck their faces."

Morrill said, "You're too hard on him."

Burmiller sighed. "I know. He's only done it a few times. Far as known. He'll probably stop if people are nice to him."

Morrill shook his head. "You're being sarcastic." He said to Marcum, "He takes these things too seriously."

"I do." Burmiller got an earnest look, like a young boy not too bright, wanting advice from Marcum. "It's a game, isn't it? We bring you the pieces, set them up, you and him play, you and Josten. You two know what you're doing, what the rules are, we don't. That's it, isn't it—a game between you and him?"

Marcum looked back at him.

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Morrill said, "He really wants to know. He's dumb, but he tries—you've got to respect him."

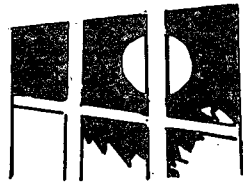
"Not *Tyler.*" Burmiller sighed. "*He* doesn't respect me. He thinks I'm dumb." He smiled at Marcum. "He respects you, though. He thinks you're really smart. Not us, we're dumb, but you're smart. A really smart lawyer."

They were quiet, drinking coffee and smiling at Marcum.

He said after a while, "Is that all?"

They didn't answer.

He nodded and left them. He didn't turn, but thought they were probably watching him, hoping he'd turn and see them watching. He stood looking more or less at the elevator door until finally it slid open. They probably watched until it slid shut behind him.



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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

ELLERY QUEEN ON RADIO: A new paperback by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. and Ray Stanich, *The Sound of Detection: Ellery Queen's Adventures in Radio,* pays fitting tribute to the hundreds of memorable radio scripts turned out by Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, with later help from Anthony Boucher, during the years 1939 to 1948.

The 90-page text by Nevins covers many of the plots and casting for the series, and also touches upon Dannay and Lee's personal lives and their collaboration, as well as Dannay's later years prior to his death in 1982. It could well serve as a supplement to *Royal Bloodline,* Nevins's Edgar-winning critical study of Ellery Queen. The text is followed by a chronology-and-episode log by Nevins and Stanich, listing every Queen radio play with invaluable notes as to tape availability or later short-story versions. A book that belongs on the shelf of every Queen fan or radio buff, it's available at $6.95 postpaid from Brownstone Books, 1711 Clifty Drive, Madison, IN 47250.

Mystery fan Joe R. Christopher has privately printed a small chapbook, *Queen's Books Investigated,* reprinting 13 brief essays of his from fan publications. Unfortunately, it's not offered for sale, but it's further evidence that interest in Queen is still very much alive a year after Fred Dannay's death.

CONVERSATIONS WITH STOUT: John McAleer, Rex Stout's biographer, has performed a valuable service with the publication of *Royal Decree,* an 80-page transcript of his conversations with the creator of Nero Wolfe. Stout's opinions on writing, on his peers, and on the Wolfe books are often blunt and always interesting. The paperbound book, in an edition of 1,000 signed copies, is published by Pontes Press at $6.50 each and can be ordered from McAleer at the address below. He also has a limited number of copies of his Edgar-winning biography, *Rex Stout,* specially priced at $12.75 postpaid and inscribed. Write John McAleer, 121 Follen Road, Lexington, MA 02173.

PWA AWARDS: At October's Bouchercon in New York City, the

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Private Eye Writers of America presented their second annual awards—to Lawrence Block for the best hardcover private-eye novel of 1982, *Eight Million Ways To Die* (Arbor House), to William Campbell Gault for the best original paperback, *The Cana Diversion* (Raven House), and to John Lutz for the best short story, "What You Don't Know Can't Hurt You" *(AHMM)*. PWA'S Lifetime Achievement Award went to Mickey Spillane, whose famed private eye, Mike Hammer, will be turning up in a weekly CBS-TV series soon.

MYSTERY INTERNATIONAL: Marie R. Reno has done a fine job of assembling a stellar cast of mystery notables for *An International Treasury of Mystery & Suspense* (Doubleday, $15.95). Its 16 stories (by Sayers, Stout, Simenon, Hammett, Chandler, etc.) and one true crime essay (by Berton Roueché) are arranged in categories that emphasize the geographic diversity of the settings. My only complaint is that nearly a third of the book is given over to yet another reprinting of Agatha Christie's familiar and readily available novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*.

FAN MAGAZINE: The Not So Private Eye, a fan publication featuring articles, quizzes, reviews, and letters about private-eye fiction, recently published its 11th issue. Future quarterly issues are planned in a combination of newsletter and magazine formats. First-class subscription is $8.00 for four issues in the U.S. and Canada, $12.00 foreign, from Andy Jaysnovitch, 6 Dana Estates Drive, Parlin, NJ 08859.

MYSTERIES ON TAPE: The Ballymote Tape Library, 223 Katonah Avenue, Katonah, NY 10536, offers tapes of famous radio thrillers of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties along with modern mysteries based upon recent novels and short stories. A free catalog is available.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Doubleday will publish Edgar-winner Wiliam DeAndrea's new Matt Cobb novel, *Killed on the Ice,* in the spring, at about the same time it publishes Orania Papazoglou's first mystery, *Sweet Savage Death.* DeAndrea and Papazoglou, who met at New York's Murder Ink bookstore, plan to be married in late December.

The first of Bob Randisi's novels about private eye Jacoby to appear in hard covers, *Full Contact,* will be published by St. Martin's Press next fall.

George Baxt's new novel, *Process of Elimination,* is due from St. Martin's Press in March.

Ellery Queen's Prime Crimes, the first in an annual series of anthologies featuring stories never before published in the U.S.—most of them never before published anywhere—edited by Eleanor Sullivan, is scheduled for winter publication, in hardcover by The Dial Press, in paperback by Davis Publications. Included is a short novel, "The Holly Wreath," by Patricia Moyes.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Although Alec Guinness does not precisely fit the description John le Carré gives us of his British Intelligence operative, George Smiley, the actor gives us such a deep-felt, introspective interpretation of that spy's many dilemmas that Smiley is the latest triumph in a career which has encompassed a good number of films with mystery elements. As Allan Hunter quotes in his recent *Alec Guinness on Screen* (Polygon), critic Kenneth Tynan once commented that were Guinness "to commit a murder, I have no doubt that the number of false arrests following the circulation of his description would break all records." The actor has often played an Everyman caught up in the swirl of overwhelming events, often in dramas of crime and espionage, across almost a half century of illustrious craftmanship.

The range of his performances was apparent from the start. His first screen role, in *Great Expectations,* was the small character part of Herbert Pocket, Pip's cheery roommate, in Charles Dickens' tale of a convict's legacy. That was in 1946. Two years later, he was cast as the centerpiece villain of David Lean's London underworld, Fagin in Dickens' *Oliver Twist.* A year after that, Guinness was allowed to play all eight murder victims in the macabrely light-hearted *Kind Hearts and Coronets,* the saga of a penniless young aristocrat (Dennis Price) who decides to remove those family members standing between himself and a titled inheritance. Producer Michael Balcon had originally been seeking eight different actors vaguely resembling one another to play the doomed family, then hit upon the idea to have Guinness portray them all, from cannon-expert Lord Rufus to ballooning-addict Lady Agatha ("I shot an arrow in the air, she fell to earth in Berkeley Square").

Guinness was now established, and starred in a series of films for Ealing Studios, a small company which had made its mark with very British comedies turned out to perfection. Two are of particular interest to us. *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951) presented Guinness as a meek bank clerk who concocts a mad plot to steal gold bullion and ship it out of the country cast as souvenir statuettes of the Eiffel Tower—crime in the hands of the gentler classes. In *The Man in the White Suit* the same year, he was the dedicated chemist who invents an indestructible cloth material, and to his surprise and horror sees it drive lords of business and labor into criminal frenzies.

In 1954, he was Chesterton's *Father Brown,* peering through heavy-lidded eyes deep into the soul of master criminal Flambeau

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(Peter Finch). The following year he was a master criminal, the sepulchral Professor Marcus leading a motley band of thieves—Peter Sellers, Herbert Lom, Cecil Parker—in *The Ladykillers*.

Guinness's next mystery films were for major studios. *The Scapegoat* (1959), taken from the Daphne Du Maurier novel—which she had written with him in mind—had him play a double role, as a teacher who assumes another man's identity, a somber and difficult drama. In Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana* the following year, he was a vacuum-cleaner salesman in Cuba recruited to be a spy whose fanciful reports to his superiors are taken in deadly earnest. He was also part of the spy network in *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), playing George Segal's superior. And in Greene's *The Comedians* a year later, he was a British major on a business trip to Haiti we soon discover is not all he seems.

Much lighter in vein was his role as the sinister blind butler in Neil Simon's outright farce, *Murder by Death* (1976), set in an old mansion to which one dark night come parodies of all the great literary detectives in the world. Going from butler Bensonmum to the old Jedi warrior embroiled in galactic intrigues in *Star Wars* was a quantum leap in characterizations, but his portrait of the wary old spymaster George Smiley in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and later in *Smiley's People* is perhaps his most outstanding achievement.

The series television format allowed him to be expansive and rounded in his portrayal of an espionage investigator searching down moles and traitors, complex men in a complex plot. In an age when the mystery and its players are often airily dismissed, one can be grateful that an actor of such substance uses his skill to weave such a mysterious web.

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INTERVIEW: DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: You've been quoted as saying, "When I finally began to write professionally I did not want to write about myself . . . which is why I think I chose the mystery: escape into escape. I have not escaped, of course."

DAVIS: It's true I've never wanted to write about myself—but what I think I'm saying is, never literally. Religious and sexual and identity conflicts: I've used them to the bottom of the cup. But part of

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my delight in the craft of writing has been to so mix them up—boy-girl, cat-nun, father-hired man, mother-spinster—that my best friend wouldn't recognize the muddled origins of, say, an Orlando.

EQMN: You've won ten scrolls from the Mystery Writers of America, which I think is a more stunning commentary than a single Edgar, don't you?

DAVIS: Ten scrolls is a couple too many, but I do have a number of them. I don't suppose I'd trade them in for one Edgar. But I might. The stunning commentary is that I'm the kid who always wanted to be first in my class.

EQMN: In his book, *The Education of an Editor,* your long-time editor at Scribners, Burroughs Mitchell, referring to an experience of yours, said: "To pursue the wrong idea, only to realize what has happened, must be the most shattering experience a writer can have. It is a moment in a writer's life that requires the greatest courage."

DAVIS: Once in my life I destroyed a completed book—or, better, a book-length manuscript—page by page in the fire. I think it was a symbolic burning. But it also freed me from a book the emotion of which was false.

EQMN: Enemy and Brother was based on the still-unsolved murder of CBS correspondent George L. Polk in Greece in 1948, during the Greek Civil War. What made you decide to write about it, and why as fiction rather than fact?

DAVIS: Enemy and Brother really wasn't based on the George L. Polk case. I wrote it after considering and abandoning the idea of doing a true treatment. For one thing, there was then—and still is—Polk family all over who might take exception. And I came to agree with Homer Bigart—and the Markos interview was based on his experience, more or less—that the only sensible way to go after such an interview was to leave Greece and re-enter by way of Albania. It still hasn't been proven, to my knowledge, that Polk's mission actually was to see Markos.

EQMN: Your *Men of No Property* is a very moving book on the Know Nothing Movement. You've mentioned the possibility of writing a book about the Pilgrims during their stay in Leyden.

DAVIS: I had intended after *Men of No Property* was published in 1956, having done up the Irish in early America rather thoroughly, to do a book about the Pilgrims in Leyden during a wonderful period, politically and artistically, in Dutch history. I did a lot of the research, but times were hard and somehow I never got to it. There's a fine suspense story, I think, and something of a mystery in why the Pilgrims, who had moved there from England, suddenly decided to join the *Mayflower* crowd and head for America. Sometimes I take a deep breath and pray a little. I have a feeling that somewhere behind the move was a crisis in faith, my favorite point of departure.

EQMN: In 1968 Scribners published *God Speed the Night,* which you wrote with Jerome Ross. How did that come about?

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DAVIS: Jerome Ross asked me—given my religious background—if I would like to collaborate on a screenplay. I wasn't long discovering myself a poor collaborator, and we agreed that I should write the novel after we plotted it together. We also agreed that the book would not be sold for film unless Jerry did the first-draft screenplay. All these conditions came to pass. I consider the book the best plotted of anything bearing my name.

EQMN: In an interview with Barbara Bannon for *Publishers Weekly* last year you said, "Not very long ago publishers thought of mysteries as their bread and butter." Blockbusters to the contrary, don't you think that day is coming again?

DAVIS: Yes!

EQMN: Is it true that Inspector Maigret is your favorite fictional detective?

DAVIS: Maigret is my favorite fictional detective—most of the time. But I think it would be more accurate to say that I deeply admire Georges Simenon's marvelous grasp of human nature.

In my own settings—and with perhaps a more modern shake for women—I would like to be able to write a Maigret.

EQMN: You once wrote, "A woman, to get in on a murder, has to be either dead or deadly, the victim or the murderer." Since you wrote that, you've given us Julie Hayes, housewife, Reader and Adviser, who becomes involved in a crime investigation in *A Death in The Life* and in a caper in *Scarlet Night.* Are you consciously raising the role of women in mystery fiction?

DAVIS: I am consciously raising the role of women in my own fiction, yes.

EQMN: Does your new book feature Julie Hayes?

DAVIS: Yes. I'm pleased with her in *Lullaby of Murder,* which will be out in early spring. She *grows.* And that for me was important, the only circumstance under which I could carry on with a continuing character.

THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Good new writers entering a field ensure its long-term vitality. This is no less true of mystery fiction than any other, and we begin with a promising sextet of debuts.

The multiple killer, one who kills and kills again either psychopathically or to disguise his principal objective, is an oft-treated subject in mystery fiction. Well plowed though this bit of field is, *A Cold Mind* by David L. Lindsay (Harper & Row, $13.95) stands out as a notable achievement, one I will not easily forget. Scene: Houston, hot and humid. A dead hooker,

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beautiful, Latin, maybe imported. Then another. And another. No logic to it, no sensible connection. Stuart Haydon is an unusual homicide cop: inherited wealth, prone to blackouts from which he returns gaunt and silent. He's just about Houston's best detective; the dead prostitutes are his case. Fascinating investigation, notably bestial killer and murder method.

Will Harriss's *The Bay Psalm Book Murder* (Walker, $12.95) is a most enjoyable and freshly told tale of bibliographic and political intrigue in Los Angeles, with an engaging protagonist about whom I could bear to read much more. Cliff Dunbar, Viet Nam veteran and just resigned English professor, looks into the murder of his best friend, a librarian whose body was found with a priceless copy of the titular book, recently donated by an aspiring politician. Police investigation stands still, but the resourceful and intelligent Dunbar uncovers some odd connections and develops doubts about the authenticity of the book. Beautifully done!

Caroline Minuscule (Dodd Mead, $12.95) by London librarian Andrew Taylor is a stylish and inventive thriller—I only wish the protagonists were a bit more likeable. Bill Dougal is an aimless graduate student in London, with a dedication to cowardice. He is asked to decipher a page of ancient manuscript which is supposed to be a clue to a cache of diamonds left by a highly unconventional cleric. Murder intervenes, but Dougal, greed overtaking cowardice, beavers away on the script. Another murder. Then, towed by his strong-willed mistress, Dougal heads for the cleric's home city, where the ungodly lie in wait.

Screenwriter Marc Rubel introduces himself and Rusty Cutler in *Flex* (St. Martin's, $14.95). Setting: L.A. area, particularly Muscle Beach, in 1958. Cutler, son of a cop turned private eye, went to San Quentin for bookmaking. His father died just after Cutler's parole, and Rusty is pressured to pick up where his father left off and find a missing teenager. The trail leads to the Beach, to deviant sex, to the local crime kingpin, to various film and society lowlifes. Such a trail could get deadly, especially when strong-arm cops take a dim view of ex-cons violating parole in all possible ways. Spirited tale.

Mickey Friedman, a reporter in San Francisco, also sets her first novel, *Hurricane Season* (Dutton, $13.95), in the past: 1952, in Gulf Coast Florida. August is hot in Palmetto, local politics are coming to the boil, rival moonshiners wrathfully take aim at each other, the town tramp decides to settle down with an unwilling married man, and the revenuers wonder who's starting a new operation. These are passions well brewed to produce murder. A strong debut, with fine characterizations and the scene well caught.

Also a satisfying first effort in our field is *The Doberman Wore Black* by Barbara Moore (St. Martin's, $13.95). Veterinarian Gordon Christy goes to Vail, Colorado, as locum tenens for the town's resident vet. His feet are hardly in the

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door when he's asked to subdue the titular dog, who's standing guard over a fresh corpse. Christy, a very likeable chap just getting started in his trade, suffers a setback or two, meets a goodly collection of interesting folks and animals, and ultimately makes the right if nearly fatal deduction. Christy has the makings of a fine series character.

Little Brother by John McNeil (Coward-McCann, $15.95) nearly has it all. Intriguing people and technology, high conflict, neat puzzles that the reader is sure will converge somehow, impressive tension. I was only a bit disappointed in the ending, which involves a genre switch for which I was ill-prepared. The main story line involves the theft of a prototype computer chip from a Boston firm whose chief customer is Possum, makers of the home computer which has taken the youth market by spellbinding storm. Toby Sorenson, tracking down the chip, finds Possum's plant unaccountably guarded like Fort Knox and his son, whom he hasn't seen in years, attached to their product like a life-support system. What deadly sort of thing is going on here?

Robin Cook has come back strongly since *Sphinx* (1979). His latest, *Godplayer* (Putnam, $14.95), is a striking evocation of the medical milieu he knows so well. Setting: a Boston hospital. Principals: renowned bypass surgeon Thomas Kingsley and his wife Cassi, herself a doctor in residency. Kingsley is an intense man, enraged by hospital intrigues and erosion of his operating-room schedule. Cassi with a friend is investigating a series of unexplained deaths of recovering patients. Kingsley becomes unpredictable, Cassi sees their marriage collapsing in ruins, and— perhaps—a killer continues to dispatch patients. Excellent suspense.

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DETECTIVERSE

IT'S A GIFT

by ANITA SIEGEL

Sebastian Blue has had cause for alarm,
But so far he's come to no permanent harm.
He's managed escape
From each dangerous scrape
Because he's a man blessed with Charme.

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DETECTIVERSE

MORE GRAVE TONES

by JAMES HOLDING

Kind passerby, please shed a tear
For her who lies deep-buried here.
Amanda Murphy was her name
And stealing fur coats was her game.
Amanda stole, when she was able,
Coats of fox and mink and sable
And hocked them with a local fence
Who gave her for them pounds and pence—
Till on a soft September night,
Amanda got a little tight
And, strolling through a London park,
Espied against the gathering dark
A leopard coat so nicely spotted
That poor Amanda, still besotted,
Grabbed the coat and in a minute
Found the leopard still was in it.

Here lies a burglar, Homer Siddent.
When a cop yelled "Freeze!" poor Siddent didn't.

The bones that sadly moulder here
Belonged to Alfred "Breaker" Weir,
Whose greatest joy and chief pursuit
Was B & E in search of loot.
The "Breaker" would be living yet
Had he not tried to rob a vet
Who kept a lion as a pet.

Hic iacet rapist Enos Flagg,
Who tried to rape a cop in drag.

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a *NEW* Interpol story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"We don't have forever," Laura told Sebastian. "You stand behind the door and I'll give a yell. That should bring someone."

When Laura yelled, it always brought someone. Her yell never failed to impress Sebastian.

Laura Charme and Sebastian Blue on summer holiday at Lake Geneva—our first story about them in nearly three years. Far too long . . .

THE CASE OF THE DROWNED CORONER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Sebastian Blue and Laura Charme had set out in their rented boat from Vevey near the eastern end of Lake Geneva—or Lac Léman as the Swiss called it. The morning was sunny, but an unseasonable June mist still clung to the water's surface. Sebastian assured Laura the sun would burn it off within an hour. The idea of exploring this fabled lake, over forty miles long, seemed an exciting way to begin their summer holiday.

Laura wore a white one-piece bathing suit under a short terrycloth robe, but Sebastian had taken a look at his blue-veined legs and decided on slacks instead. "It's good to be away from Interpol," she said. "A holiday from crime!"

"Not for Interpol. I sometimes fear the really serious crime is passing us by at Saint-Cloud. The nations of the world are linked by computer, and crime knows no boundaries, yet we go on our way pretty much as we have for years."

"Sebastian," Laura cautioned, "I said holiday!"

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"Sorry."

"Sit back and enjoy the scenery. It's lovely here, isn't it?"

Sebastian let his eyes roam over the distant mountain peaks that seemed to rise like sentinels around the lake. "It has been for centuries. I can almost imagine Shelley and Lord Byron drifting along like this."

"Sebastian—what's that?" Laura's voice was wary.

He followed her pointing finger and saw a dark shape break the placid surface of the water. "Perhaps a log."

"It looks like a body to me."

"I'm sure you're mistaken," he said, but even as the words left his mouth the wake of their boat turned the thing in the water and they saw its face. He cut the motor and they drifted toward it. "Get that hook from the back of the boat, Laura."

"It *is* a body, isn't it?"

"It seems to be," he admitted, scanning the shoreline for the nearest dwelling.

In a moment he'd managed to snag the body's clothing and pull it to them. "A man, middle-aged—"

"With a wound in his back," Laura finished. "He's been murdered, Sebastian!"

"Never jump to conclusions. Here, take the hook and hang on. I'll head us toward shore."

It took them ten minutes to maneuver their craft to the nearest boat dock, which seemed connected to a large cottage that overlooked the lake from a nearby bluff. Then Sebastian made a short leap onto the dock, securing the boat and helping Laura lift the body from the water.

They'd just finished the task when they saw a tall slender man descending the bluff from the cottage above. "What seems to be the trouble?" he called out in French.

"A dead man in the water," Laura answered. "We found him about a hundred yards off your dock."

"You'd better call the police," Sebastian said in English.

The tall man switched to English, too. "The telephone is out of order at the moment, but it should be fixed soon. My name is Jonathan Dredder. I live here with my wife." By this time he had joined them on the pier.

"Do you recognize him?" Sebastian looked down at the body. "Is he a neighbor?"

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"My God! It's Dr. Polidori!"

"His name is *Polidori?*"

"Yes, he's a good friend of ours. He often visited us. This is a terrible thing! My wife will be very upset!"

"I'd like to cover him with this boat tarpaulin," Laura said.

"Of course. Then come with me to the house. We must somehow get word to the authorities about this terrible accident!"

"It was no accident," Laura told him. "Your friend has a deep wound in his back. He may have been murdered."

"Impossible! Polidori hadn't an enemy in the world."

"Perhaps it was a robbery," Sebastian suggested.

"That's unthinkable. It must have been some sort of boating accident. Come along to the house."

They followed him up the path to the cottage, where a woman was waiting in the doorway. "What is it, Jonathan?" she asked, nervously twisting a handkerchief as she spoke. "What's happened?"

"There's been a boating accident, my dear. I'm afraid Dr. Polidori—"

"Oh, no!"

He slipped his arm around her shoulders to comfort her. "This is Janice, my wife. And you're—?"

"Sebastian Blue. This is Laura Charme. We're here on a holiday."

"I see," he murmured, but for the moment he was more interested in seeing to his wife. Janice Dredder was a plain, dark-haired woman of indeterminate age, though she seemed younger than her grizzled husband.

"Please sit down," she said, recovering her composure and motioning toward a large sitting room with windows overlooking the lake. The entire far wall of the cottage was given over to a natural stone fireplace. With the room's beamed ceiling, it reminded Sebastian more of a mountain hunting lodge than a lake cottage.

"This is a lovely place," Laura commented.

"We like it," Jonathan Dredder said. "Since my retirement we've lived here year-round."

"What business were you in?" Sebastian asked.

"Banking. In Switzerland it's a growth industry." Suddenly he seemed to remember the reason for their visit. "We must do something about poor Polidori."

"We'll telephone the local police," Janice Dredder said, going to the phone and picking it up.

"Your husband said it was out of order," Laura told her.

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"No, it works fine."

"There was static on the line earlier," Dredder explained to his wife.

"I'll give it a try," she said. She got through to someone on the other end and spoke rapidly in French. When she hung up she said, "They'll send someone soon. The village police here don't work very fast."

"Meanwhile let me offer you a drink," Jonathan Dredder said.

"Perhaps a little white wine," Laura agreed. "Thank you."

"The lake was misty when we started out," Sebastian said, gazing out at the water below.

"It often is in early summer. The nights can still be quite cool here in June."

"I was just saying to Laura earlier that this lake probably hasn't changed a great deal since the days of Shelley and Lord Byron."

"Ah," Dredder said. "That's quite a coincidence. The original Polidori was the other member of their little party that fateful June in 1816. He had joined Shelley, Byron, Mary Godwin, and Jane Clairmont on their holiday here that summer. As you probably know, the rainy evenings led them to telling ghost stories around the fire, and soon they decided they would each write a ghost story. Mary Godwin—soon to be Mary Shelley after the death of his first wife—produced *Frankenstein,* and Dr. Polidori wrote a vampire tale that was later published."

"*We* often told stories when *our* Polidori visited," Janice Dredder added. She paused. "Jonathan thinks of us as Shelley and Mary."

"But where are your Byron and Jane?" Laura asked.

"Perhaps that's who you are" she suggested.

Sebastian put up a hand. "Let the analogy stop there. I'm far too old and too unromantic to be Lord Byron. And the original Polidori didn't meet so violent a death."

"It was violent enough," Dredder said. "He took poison at twenty-five, just four years after the famous summer here."

"It's amazing how young they all were," Laura observed. "I remember reading that Mary Shelley was only nineteen when she wrote *Frankenstein.* —Exactly who was Polidori?"

"He was Byron's friend and personal physican. He was part Italian and part English."

Sebastian nodded his head toward the dock. "And was this Polidori your physican as well?"

"Hardly. He was the coroner's physician for this area."

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They heard the pulsating blare of a siren in the distance, growing closer. Janice Dredder went to the front door as a police car and an emergency-rescue vehicle pulled up. While Dredder guided the emergency crew down the slope to the body, a local police official named Marron spoke to Sebastian.

"It was you who found the body?"

"That's correct. Miss Charme here was with me." Sebastian produced his Interpol identification. "We're not in the area on official business, only on holiday."

"Interpol!" Marron exclaimed. "You impress me, Monsieur!" There might have been just a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"We set out from Vevey this morning," Laura told him. "The body was floating face down about a hundred yards out from the pier down below."

Marron shook his head. "Only a hundred yards? I would hope it had been further out, in Swiss territory."

"Isn't this—?"

The inspector shook his head.

"You set out from Vevey, on the north shore, and that is Switzerland, of course. But this portion of the south shore is France. —Now tell me about the body."

Laura and Sebastian went over the story again. There was little to tell, but by the time they'd finished the body had been brought up from the dock. Marron's assistant, a slim young man named Jiles, came in to report. "There's a fatal wound in the back, Inspector. Not like the others."

Sebastian perked up. "What others?"

Marron shrugged it off. "There have been two recent drownings in this area."

"So that is why an inspector is sent out on a routine case."

"My title means little," Marron said with a tired smile. "In a place like this, my pay is little more than one of your constables."

"Were the other deaths murder, too?" Laura asked.

"They appeared to be drownings. But one never knows."

"Polidori said he thought there might be a monster in the lake," Jonathan Dredder said.

Marron scoffed at that. "Polidori was a dreamer." He stood up and followed Jiles to the door. "I must go now, but we may have further questions later."

When they departed with the body, Sebastian said, "We must be going, too."

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"Let us fix you some tea or coffee first," Janice Dredder insisted. "We get so few visitors here, and there will be one less without poor Dr. Polidori."

They allowed themselves to be persuaded, and as Laura set aside her empty wine glass to sip a cup of tea she asked, "Do you really believe there could be a monster in the lake?"

"No, no!" Dredder scoffed. "Polidori made up a story about one during our tale-spinning sessions, but it was all fiction!"

"I'd like to hear it," Sebastian said.

"It was a mystery story." Janice settled into a chair, warming to the conversation. "About a drowning victim who was washed up on the shore of the lake and brought into town for a routine autopsy. But the doctor performing the autopsy discovered the body had already been cut open and sewn up again. He began to imagine some terrible creature in the lake who might do this to its victims."

"And was there such a creature," Sebastian wondered, "in Dr. Polidori's tale?"

"We don't know," Jonathan Dredder responded. "He never finished the story."

"I see. —Marron mentioned that there had been other drownings recently. Had Dr. Polidori performed an autopsy on any of them?"

"As a matter of fact, he had," Janice confirmed. "Perhaps that's what gave him the idea for his little tale."

"Could it have been based on reality?"

"You mean an actual creature in the lake? Oh, I hardly think so."

"And yet Polidori is dead." Sebastian set down his teacup. "When was the last time you saw him alive?"

Dredder turned to his wife. "When was it, Janice? Two days ago?"

She nodded. "He was going over to Lausanne, across the lake, on business."

"And you saw nothing more of him?" asked Sebastian.

"Nothing," Dredder agreed. "Until you brought his body in."

"We'd best be getting back," Laura said, putting down her cup. "I don't like those clouds over the lake. It wouldn't be a good place to be during a storm."

"There's nothing to fear," Dredder assured her. "A few sprinkles at most."

They made their way back down to the dock, where their boat drifted idly from its moorings. As they pulled away from shore, Laura said, "There's something odd about those two."

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"Maybe," Sebastian replied.

"Do you think they killed Polidori?"

"What motive could they have?"

"Something dark and sinister," Laura decided.

"We're on holiday—remember?"

"But we found the body right off their pier."

"Yes," he conceded.

"Maybe they killed the others too, and Polidori found out."

"He found out something, or was trying to. I think that's why he went to Lausanne."

"What is there to find in Lausanne?" Laura wondered.

"I don't know," Sebastian admitted. "But the Dredders offered no evidence that Polidori ever returned from there alive. Lausanne is only about seven miles directly across from here. The body could have floated across."

Laura sighed. "Our holiday is fading fast. We sound as if we're back to work."

Back at Vevey, they changed clothes and reached Lausanne by midafternoon. Tracing Polidori's movements there proved easier than they'd expected. He'd registered at one of the larger hotels and asked the concierge for directions to a number of banks and safe-deposit vaults.

"What time did he check out?" Sebastian asked the room clerk.

"We have no record of a checkout, sir. Are you with the police?"

He showed his Interpol identification. "Dr. Polidori's body was recovered from the other side of the lake this morning. I'm surprised the local police haven't been here already."

"Another drowning? Two local residents have drowned recently."

"I see." Now Sebastian knew why Polidori had chosen Lausanne for his investigation.

The clerk made a phone call to the head housekeeper and established that Polidori's small overnight bag was still in his room. Sebastian and Laura found little of interest in it, except some clippings about the earlier drownings and—surprisingly—a small uncut diamond in an envelope. When they left the hotel he told her, "At least we know he was killed on this side of the lake. And maybe robbery was the motive, after all—if he had more diamonds with him."

"Could the body have floated that far in just a few hours' time?"

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"Those few hours could be more like twelve—and for all we know it could have been dumped from a boat halfway across."

"I suppose so." She sighed. "What now?"

"I want to find out something about the two previous drowning victims. You check with the police here while I try to find out what Polidori was after at those banks."

"Do you really think robbery was the motive?"

"I doubt it. I think he found out something, and had to be killed. Let's learn what we can and meet back here at the hotel for dinner."

Laura's visit to the Lausanne police went smoothly, but yielded surprisingly little in the way of facts. The two previous victims, unlike Polidori, were local vagrants who'd been arrested on occasion for public drunkenness. When the first one was found dead across the lake, no one gave it a second thought—he'd simply fallen off a pier while drunk and the current had carried him across. When a second man died in the same manner a month later, the police finally started asking questions. It was possible, a bland middle-aged inspector admitted to Laura, that someone was killing vagrants and dumping their bodies into Lake Geneva—but that could hardly be concluded on the basis of two deaths.

"Three deaths," Laura reminded him.

"Ah, but Dr. Polidori was different. He was not a vagrant. He was not a resident of Lausanne. And he was clearly murdered. The first two appear to have been drowned."

"Did you receive copies of the autopsy reports from French police?"

"Oh, certainly."

"I wonder if I could see them?" Laura asked.

"It's highly irregular," the inspector muttered, shifting the papers on his desk. "I've had no direct request from Interpol."

"I'm Interpol, and I'm making a direct request."

He blinked his eyes, studied her, and finally said, "Very well. Wait here, please."

When they were finally in her hands, the autopsy reports seemed utterly routine. Laura's knowledge of medical French was not perfect, but she could see that the two vagrants had indeed died of drowning. She was about to return the reports to the inspector when something caught her eye. The second autopsy had been signed by Dr. Marcello Polidori. That much was true.

She remembered the story he'd told the Dredders and flipped back to the first page of the report.

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Yes, there it was—a stitched-up incision in the chest cavity. She had visions of ritual murderers removing the hearts from their victims, but the report listed the heart and other organs as being present and accounted for.

Laura turned to the autopsy report on the first victim. The same thing. The same incision, but again no obvious tampering with any of the body's organs. Had both victims been wounded at some previous time? Was that why they'd been drowned? No, the reports described the incisions as being recent, possibly inflicted after death.

How do you drown someone in Lake Geneva and *then* cut them open?

Oh, how stupid! Just because the bodies were found in the lake, it didn't mean they'd drowned there. The water in a bathtub would do just as well, and since Geneva was a fresh-water lake, a casual autopsy wouldn't reveal the difference. No one would take the time to analyze the water from the lungs for possible additives such as one found in municipal water supplies.

"Have you found what you wanted?" the inspector asked.

"I think so, yes." She returned the reports to him. "You've been most helpful."

She left the building and went off to meet Sebastian.

Sebastian had spent the late afternoon trying to discover what Polidori had been seeking at the city's banks. Apparently he'd made specific inquiries regarding safe-deposit boxes, but under Swiss banking laws he'd been told very little. He'd been looking for something, and it seemed likely that his curiosity had led to his death. But what was there to find?

After spending a couple of frustrating hours trying to make himself understood, Sebastian finally gave it up and returned to the hotel to meet Laura. He'd expected that she'd be in the lobby ahead of him and was mildly surprised that he'd arrived first.

For the first half hour of waiting, he wasn't overly concerned, imagining only that she'd uncovered information interesting enough to delay her beyond their arranged meeting time. But then an hour passed and Sebastian began to grow uneasy. They were, after all, investigating a trio of mysterious deaths. Laura might have stumbled onto something a bit more than she could handle.

He left the hotel and started down the street, not knowing exactly where he was going. All right, she had gone to the police to inquire about the drowning deaths. After that she might have strolled past

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the cathedral on her way back to the hotel. She might even have taken the brief railway ride to Ouchy, the city's port on Lake Geneva only a mile away. Or she might have walked down the hill to the waterfront area.

But he had nothing to base that on, and by now she might be back at the hotel, alarmed by his own absence. He'd about decided to return there when a man stepped from the late-afternoon shadows and asked, "You are Sebastian Blue?"

"Yes?"

The man was short and wore canvas deck-shoes with jeans and a t-shirt. "I have a message from Laura Charme."

"How did you know me?"

"Someone from the hotel pointed you out. She is waiting for you in Ouchy, by the marina there."

"I expected as much."

As he followed the little man onto the funicular railway, he wondered if death was waiting in Ouchy, too.

They made the steep descent to the port area and the man led him to a little boathouse near the marina. Laura jumped up when she saw Sebastian enter. "It's a trap!" she warned him. "Why did you come?"

"Because I couldn't bear the thought of you being trapped alone," he replied, and then something hard thudded against the back of his head.

When he awoke, it was night and he knew at once from the swaying of the floor that he was in a boat on the lake. He could see nothing in the darkness of the cabin, and when he tried to move he discovered his hands were tied.

"Sebastian?" Laura asked, her voice very close. "Are you awake?"

"Yes." His own voice surprised him with its raspiness.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll live. What happened? Who are these people?" He tried to keep his voice low, matching hers in the darkness.

"I don't know. I saw the autopsy reports, and on my way back to the hotel a man intercepted me. He claimed to have important information, and like a fool I believed him. I got into a car with him and there was another one hiding in the back seat."

"So it seems we've stumbled onto something. How far are we from shore?"

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"A good distance. You've been out for more than an hour. At first I thought you were dead."

"Not yet, but don't think we both might not be soon. Their bringing us out on this boat is probably to make a couple more drowning victims of us."

"That thought crossed my mind."

"Are you tied? Where are you?"

"Yes. I'm in the next bunk, about three feet from you."

"I can see you a bit now." His eyes were adjusting to the dark. He rolled off the bunk and discovered his feet were free. In his unconscious state, they hadn't felt it necessary to tie him securely.

"Where are you going, Sebastian?"

"We're not going to stay here and be food for the fish. Can you reach the knots on my ropes?"

She strained and fumbled with them, tugging without result. "It's no good, Sebastian. My fingers are numb."

"All right." His fingers found the metal edge of the bunk and he started sawing at the ropes on his wrists, moving his arms up and down. "This metal isn't sharp. It'll probably take me forever."

"We don't have forever," she said. "You stand behind the door and I'll give a yell. That should bring someone." When Laura yelled, it always brought someone. Her yell never failed to impress Sebastian.

As the cabin door swung open in the darkness and a hand reached for the light switch, Sebastian hit the door hard with his shoulder, slamming it into their captor. "What the hell—" the man gasped. He was off balance and in an instant they had him down. Laura pressed a nerve in his neck and he was unconscious. Then Sebastian pulled the knife from his belt and in an instant they were free.

"Come on," he said. "There'll be more on deck, and they'll have guns." His warning was all too true. As soon as they appeared in the hatchway, there was a shout and the cough of a small handgun. A bullet thudded into the wood near Laura's head. "Over the side!" Sebastian shouted. "Swim for it!"

They hit the water together as more shots followed. Laura went under and he thought for a moment she'd been hit. Then she surfaced about twenty feet away, swimming toward the lights of shore, which were surprisingly near. There were no more shots, though they could see and feel the small cabin cruiser circling and searching.

"I think we'll make it," Laura called to him when they were far enough from the boat.

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And indeed Sebastian's feet touched bottom in another moment. They waded the rest of the way to shore and collapsed on dry land.

Moments later, the beam of a spotlight hit them and a familiar voice called out, "What happened to you two? Let us get you up to the house!"

It was Jonathan Dredder. They were back on his side of the lake.

As soon as they reached the house at the top of the bluff, Janice Dredder appeared with dry clothes for them. Somehow she didn't seem the least surprised to see them. "I hope these fit," she said, handing them over. "You can change in the bedroom."

"Sorry to trouble you like this," Laura said breathlessly, trying to offer an explanation. "Our boat capsized—"

"You shouldn't have been out after dark," Dredder said. "No lake is safe at night."

Alone in the bedroom, Laura whispered, "They're behind it, aren't they?"

"Possibly," Sebastian admitted.

"Remember how he lied to us this morning about the phone being out of order? We've gone from the frying pan into the fire!"

"Look, I'll try to keep them occupied. After a few minutes, you excuse yourself and call the police on that phone. If it's working, maybe we can get help."

They returned to the living room, where Dredder had started a roaring fire in the great stone fireplace. "A little wine to take the chill off," Janice suggested, "and perhaps we can have some stories."

"We really must be getting back," Sebastian said.

Dredder said, "Nonsense! We have a spare bedroom and you can stay the night. By morning we might find that your boat has drifted into shore."

"I doubt that," Laura said. Then, with a glance toward Sebastian, she amended, "It might be worth a try. But I'll have to phone across to where we're staying. They'll be worried if they find the boat. I don't want people out all night searching for our bodies."

"The phone's been acting up—" Dredder said.

But Laura beat him across the room and picked up the receiver. "It seems to be working now. I'll just make my call."

To cover the sound of her voice, Sebastian launched into a long, loud account of his days in England when he'd been a Scotland Yard Inspector before joining Interpol. The Dredders seemed mildly in-

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terested but after Laura returned it was obvious Janice wanted to talk about the lake.

"So many bodies," she mused. "And you almost became two more! Dr. Polidori used to say it was the lake claiming victims to make up for all those centuries of misuse."

"I think the killings in the lake these recent weeks had a far more practical purpose," Sebastian said.

"Polidori died because of the first two?"

"Yes," Sebastian agreed.

Janice Dredder unstopped a decanter of wine and began pouring it. "I think we all need something to take the chill off," she said.

Laura accepted the wine but immediately set it down untasted. Her ears had picked up the sound of an approaching siren and she glanced across the room at Sebastian.

"Could that be the police?" Dredder asked. "At this time of night?"

"I called them," Laura admitted. "The phone wasn't out of order this morning, was it?"

Jonathan Dredder frowned at her. "You've been very foolish."

"Why was Polidori murdered?" she wanted to know.

"Laura—" Sebastian tried to cut in, but she'd gotten to her feet. Janice also rose from her chair and went to open the front door. In another moment Inspector Marron entered, holding his pistol ready.

"What's going on here?" he demanded of Laura. "The call said you two feared for your lives."

Sebastian smiled. "Laura acted a bit impetuously, I'm afraid."

Laura turned, startled. "Sebastian—you told me to call them!"

Sebastian lifted his wine glass and turned toward the inspector. "It's all a misunderstanding. Sorry to get you out here like this."

It was Marron's turn to smile. "No trouble at all. You see, I was coming out here anyway, on some unfinished business."

He was starting to raise the gun when Sebastian hurled the wine into his face.

"You could have told me, Sebastian," Laura complained later, after charges had been filed against Inspector Marron and an alarm had gone out for the rest of the gang.

"There was no time, and, anyway, you sounded more convincing on the telephone, thinking your life was threatened by the Dredders."

"Those poor people—they were innocent all the time."

Sebastian nodded. "Eccentric, but innocent. And I suppose Marron

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would have killed them along with us. You see, Polidori stumbled upon the truth during the autopsy and carried his investigations across the lake where the dead men originated."

"But how did you know Marron was in on it?"

"Somebody had to recover the bodies. That was crucial to the entire scheme. Who'd be in a better position than the local police inspector called to the scene? I was suspicious from the first when he arrived at the Dredders and didn't even walk down the hill to look at the body. He didn't have to because he knew what he'd see."

"What if some other police jurisdiction had gotten the call?"

"The bodies were brought in quite close to this shore before they were dumped. The gang couldn't risk losing one of them. And Marron simply tapped into all the phones along this stretch of shoreline so he'd be sure to get the call first. I imagine the static Dredder heard on the line was Marron attaching his taps."

"But what were they doing with those bodies, Sebastian?"

"Remember the small uncut diamond in Polidori's overnight bag? I think he found that in the chest cavity of the second drowning victim when he performed the autopsy. Somehow it got loose from the package they'd secreted there."

"Explain, please. Dear Sebastian."

"The gang was using the bodies of vagrants, conveniently drowned in advance, to smuggle packages of uncut diamonds out of Switzerland and into France. Apparently they'd been stored in Swiss banks and had to be taken across the border undetected. The diamonds, suitably protected, were inserted into the chest cavities of the corpses, and the incision was stitched up. On this end, Marron removed the packages and restitched the incision on the way to the morgue. It might have worked except for one thing—they didn't have Polidori in on it. When he found the diamond and checked the previous autopsy report for the same type of incision, he must have guessed the truth. He couldn't go to Marron, of course, so he tried to gather more evidence in Lausanne, probably to give the Swiss police. But the people over there got him, just as they almost got us."

"Would they have done the same thing to us?" Laura wondered.

"I don't know. It might depend on whether they had any diamonds left over."

"Come on, Sebastian," Laura decided. "The holiday's over. Let's go home. I'll feel far safer back in Paris."

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A short and shivery you-supply-the-ending story . . .

THIS ISN'T ME

by GEOFFREY BUSH

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Miss Durning, this is Mr. Freeman's office calling. Can you audition as a stand-by for *Maternity Ward* at five o'clock this afternoon?

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Carol, this is Debbie. The movement class is at eleven instead of ten. Got it? Eleven instead of ten. Very important.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Ah—your skirt is ready. Is Maria. Your skirt is ready to pick up today, until six.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Hello, dearest.

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Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

This is Mr. Freeman's office. We need to confirm your five o'clock audition. Can you make it? We must know by three-thirty at the latest.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Hey, this is Debbie. The movement class did the whole first part of "Nuclear Holocaust" without you. Where were you, sweetie? Didn't you get my message?

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

I love you, dearest.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

I'll always love you, dearest.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Listen, you rat. This is Teddi. Your lunch date. Remember? One-thirty at Salad Daze? You have another chance tomorrow, same time, same place. But *call* me.

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Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

You made me so happy last night, dearest, when you told me you love me, too.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Hi. Nan. The more I think about it, Carol honey, the more I think you were right to break things off. Those big brown eyes and that shy smile are great, but the boy adores you a little *too* much. He doesn't *own* you. How'd he take it? Give me a call and let me know all the details.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Why haven't you called me? Are you out shopping for those French rolls I like?
See you at seven, dearest.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Miss Durning? This is Mr. Freeman's office again. Mr. Freeman is sorry, but he has to send someone else.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

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I'll be starting out for your place in an hour, dearest. I'll bring the wine.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

Ah—is Maria. Have to go now. You pick up skirt tomorrow.

Hello, darling. This isn't me, this is one of those recordings. Isn't it awful? Don't you *hate* it? But *please* say something. Tell the machine your name and number, after the little beep, or I'll be scared to *death*. Here it comes. *Now*.

I'm a little worried. It's time to leave. You will be there waiting for me, won't you, dearest?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

UPPER-CRUST CRIME

by JANET ANTONIUS

An impoverished lady of stealth
Whose rich aunt was the picture of health
Crept in on the sly
And poisoned her pie
But the cat was sole heir to the wealth.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Fear hit Birtles in the stomach like a draught of acid. Barbie with her curly head and the sweet baby face and her silent understanding of what he was going through in losing her would never do a midnight flit. Something had happened to her. She was in trouble . . .

SILENTLY, IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The telephone rang on the bedside table and jarred Birtles awake. He picked it up and listened.

"Norman?"

"What time is it?" The dryness in his mouth was not unpleasant. He had taken just the right amount of whisky but not enough sleep.

"Almost eight. I thought you'd be up."

"I don't go in till one. Charlie opens the place today." He stared at the window and the grey autumn light. "It's as if I'm still delivering the mail."

"I'm sorry." But she didn't sound sorry. She sounded as bright as her lacquered hair. Birtles could imagine Anitra Colahan dressed and groomed as for a tango competition, earrings sparkling, short skirt flaring over several crinolines. "I missed you last night," she said. "I thought you were coming over."

"We had trouble balancing the cash after we closed. And then Charlie offered me a lift home." Only partly a lie. The cash had been a problem but he ended up taking a cab from the rank outside Wimbledon Station.

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"I would have driven you home."

"I don't want you on the roads at that time of night." What Birtles really didn't want was to be stuck in the death seat speeding along London streets after midnight. Anitra had taken the driving test three times before passing. Her style at the wheel was risky and spectacular, much like her performance on the dance floor.

"Can you come by the studio tonight?" she asked. "I have something to tell you. Something nice."

"O.K. I finish at six."

"Lovely. We can go to the Taj. It's good news, Norman."

Birtles checked the bathroom window-ledge but found no note. When Barbie wanted to be called in the morning, she would leave a page from her notebook pinned under the talcum-powder tin and the breezy words, the erratic left-handed scrawl always gave Birtles a lift. The absence of a note probably meant his daughter would be sleeping till noon. Which meant he wouldn't see her before he went to the poolroom. One more day gone from the diminishing week before she took off for Canada.

Birtles went downstairs and along the hall toward the kitchen, passing Barbie's bedroom on the way. The door was open. What he saw stopped him cold. The room was empty, the backpack gone, her makeup, brush, and comb vanished from the dresser. The bed was in disarray but that was normal—he couldn't tell if she had slept here last night.

Perhaps she'd left a note somewhere in the room. Birtles looked around but found no message among the clutter of pop-music magazines, soft-drink tins, overloaded ashtrays, and the accumulation of discarded clothing.

There was a coffee mug on the bedside table. Birtles picked it up carefully—sometimes they were half full of murky liquid. This one was dry but there was a crumpled envelope tucked inside it.

He unfolded the envelope, found it unaddressed. Some greenish-brown grains of leaf fell into the palm of his hand. They looked like something from one of his spice jars. Printed in the corner of the envelope was: Hotel Candide, Inverness Avenue, London W2.

Carrying his discovery into the kitchen, Birtles put the kettle on, made toast, made coffee, ate and drank standing while he tried to handle his feelings. The sight of Barbie's room deserted had shaken him. He was not looking forward to her going away. When his wife died six years ago, he had kept going for Barbie's sake. Part of him had wanted to convert what little he had into cash and head off to

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some hot country where his main duty would have been to keep himself drunk.

Instead, he had become a meal-maker and housekeeper. Well, it was an achievement, something to be proud of, and Barbie's confident character was the result. His example had taught her how to soldier on. Now, apparently, she had packed up her possessions in her old kit bag and hit the long, long trail. Without even saying goodbye.

No, that wasn't possible. Barbie with her curly head and the sweet baby face and her silent understanding of what he was going through in losing her would never do a moonlight flit. Fear hit Birtles in the stomach like a draught of acid. Something had happened to her. She was in trouble.

It was early to ring Jeremy but Birtles couldn't wait. The boy came on the phone coughing like a veteran. "Sorry to disturb you but I was wondering if you saw Barbie last night."

"We didn't, Mr. Birtles. The band was playing at the Ploughman. If she'd been in, I'd have known about it."

"O.K. Sorry to wake you."

"Barbie hasn't come around much the last few months. She's saving her money."

"I know. I've had to put up with her almost every night. Like an old married couple." Birtles kept two trays handy and produced supper regularly in front of the TV. They watched everything, not reacting much, in comforting balance there side by side in the upholstered chairs drawn round to face the screen.

"If you see her, ask her to call home."

At the poolroom, only three of the nineteen tables were in use. It was too nice a day for people to be inside shooting snooker. Charlie was behind the counter serving the occasional beer or Coke, answering the phone, reading a tabloid of few words and many pictures. It was pointless for two of them to be on duty on such a quiet afternoon, so Birtles suggested Charlie take off.

"I'll go in a minute." Charlie went on reading. Birtles strode back and forth, his rangy figure looming large over the counter. When he had been employed by the Post Office, before the economy cuts made him redundant, more than one customer told him they always knew when the mail was on the way, he was so easy to spot coming up the street. Now he mopped clean a spotless surface, snapped his fingers, opened and closed the refrigerator cabinet.

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"You're giving me the creeps, Norman. Settle down."

Suddenly, at the end of the room where the card table was situated, a chair was kicked back, players were on their feet, arms extended across the table grabbing shirtfronts. Without a word, Birtles reached for the light panel and snapped the switch controlling the lamp over the table. He raised the counter gate and strode to the scene, head on one side, arms loose, the picture of a man with his patience exhausted. He recognized the troublemaker and faced him.

"You! Out!" Said while pointing at the door.

"This geezer's won all the money and now he wants to quit."

"I said when I sat down I'd have to leave—"

Birtles cut through the argument. "Walk to the door. If I have to say it again, you won't touch many steps on the way down."

Back behind the counter, his hands trembled as he tried to open a box of pool chalk. The cubes went all over the counter, some on the floor. Charlie watched him. "Are you all right?"

"A little nervous."

"You were awfully rough for a first offense."

"A little nervous today."

Charlie folded his paper and took the afternoon off. When he reported back at six, Birtles washed up and then walked on down the Broadway to the dance salon. He climbed more stairs and emerged in the ballroom. Anitra was on the floor with her client, taking him through the basic movements of the cha-cha. As they vamped across acres of polished hardwood, their images were reflected in a series of mirrors.

Birtles took a chair against the wall. The client had the grace of a piano mover but Anitra managed to make him look competent. She glistened in her freshly done peach hair, her swirling skirt, those shiny tapered legs ending in blue sequined high-heeled pumps. "One and two, cha-cha-cha," she commanded while the recording of a brassy Latin band played "Tea For Two." She spotted Birtles and blew him a kiss.

The client left at last after an exchange of money and a flurry of cheek-kissing. Anitra came and sat beside Birtles, kicking off her shoes and slipping into a pair that looked less like they had been built by a custom-car maker. "Bless his heart," she said, "he'll never be a dancer but it keeps me working."

"What's your good news?" Birtles asked, putting on a smile.

"You look tired. Are you all right?"

"You said it was special."

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"They're making me manager here. That means I'll get a regular salary in addition to the fees for my lessons."

"Congratulations." She was expecting to be kissed. He leaned towards that rouged cheek, inhaled the lilac scent, kissed her. That was the trouble—she was warm and soft and if he wasn't careful she would become a part of him and then she would leave or die and that part would be torn out without benefit of anaesthetic.

"I think you should let me treat you to dinner," she said.

"Never refuse a free meal."

They went next door to the Taj Mahal and ordered onion bahjis, Madras curry and chapatis, and a bottle of white wine. Late in the meal, Birtles found the courage to say: "Barbie wasn't there this morning. Her room was empty, everything gone as if she'd moved out. But she'd never do that without telling me."

"I knew something was the matter. When is she supposed to leave for Canada?"

"End of next week."

"No note in her room? Nothing?"

Birtles took the crumpled envelope out of his pocket and put it on the table. "I found this."

"Hotel Candide." Anitra studied the few grains of leaf. "Looks like something the kids smoke."

"I suppose so. They tell me it's no worse than this." He drank some wine. "I'm wondering if it's a clue to where she might have gone. The envelope, I mean."

"Are you thinking of calling the police?"

"They wouldn't want to know. A girl Barbie's age, they'd assume she's gone off with friends. Especially since she's saved up a pile of money and had a trip planned."

"How much has she saved?"

"Over six hundred pounds. It was all in traveler's checks. She was ready to go."

Anitra poured the grains back into the envelope. "Where do you suppose she got this?"

"I'm not sure. There was a girl came to see her the other day but she didn't stay long. A girl from up the hill in the village. Barbie told me her name—Lucy Feather."

Birtles remembered the girl's arrival at the front door one morning a couple of days ago. Barbie was still in bed. "I'm Lucy Feather. Did Barbie tell you I'd be coming by? She has a book I'd like to borrow."

"Yes, she mentioned you. Come in, you may have to wake her up.

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It's the door at the end of the hall." Birtles watched the movement of her skintight jeans. She was a solid girl with hair three shades of blonde. Her tweed jacket was expensive; she was not one of the dole-queue layabouts who comprised most of Barbie's list of friends.

Birtles went into the kitchen. Through the wall he heard their voices but not their words. The conversation was not exactly amicable. Barbie's final statement sounded like an invitation for Lucy Feather to get the hell out of there.

The bedroom door slammed. Birtles hurried into the hall and accompanied the visitor to the front door. "Got it, thanks." She waved a paperback at him—he recognized it as an in-depth report on a psychopath named Eric Merlot who had drugged and murdered a dozen young travelers in the Far East over a period of years.

When she was gone, Birtles had rapped on Barbie's door and put his head inside the stuffy room.

"Everything O.K.?"

The curly head turned on the pillow and Barbie gave Birtles that reassuring, almost patronizing smile that reminded him of his mother. Who was forty-eight and who was nineteen here? "She wants me to go to India with her instead of Canada. I told her no thanks."

"I heard you."

"All right, I told her to get stuffed. I don't get my kicks from catching dysentery."

"I thought she was a friend."

"She's crazy. Her parents threw her out of the house and she came back when they were out and set fire to her room. I can do without friends like her."

Anitra spooned up syrup from her dish of lichees as she listened to Birtles' account of the Lucy Feather visit. At the end, she said: "Is it possible she persuaded Barbie to go with her after all?"

"I doubt it."

"Kids are impulsive. They might have got high last night and decided to head east. Maybe there was a coach leaving late, or somebody with a car. Barbie didn't want to wake you, so she got her stuff and took off. As soon as they come to a phone, she'll get through to you."

"It's a theory. But it doesn't sound like my daughter." Birtles smoothed the envelope and studied the hotel address by the light of the small candle in its red globe.

"All right," Anitra said, "I know what's on your mind. Come on, I'll drive you to Inverness Avenue . . ."

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Thanks to some fine defensive driving by other motorists, Anitra Colahan made the trip safely. She controlled her second-hand Mini like a rally driver, shoulders up, hands locked on the wheel at the "ten minutes to two" position, and the choreography of her feet on and off the pedals was constant. Birtles braced himself, one hand on the door handle, the other flat against the dash.

"Relax," Anitra said. "Everything's under control."

"Let me out at the traffic lights. I'll get a taxi."

"All right, I'll slow down." She sulked for a few blocks but couldn't contain her aggression any longer than that. Soon she was cutting in and out again, carving up the passive drivers.

Inverness Avenue turned out to be a short street of Edwardian houses not far from Kensington Gardens. Almost without exception, the buildings had been converted into hotels. Anitra found the Candide and parked across the road.

"What do we do now?"

"I'm going to go in and ask a few questions."

"O.K., I'll wait."

"Thanks, but there's no point. If I get no joy from the desk clerk, I'm going to hang around and watch the place."

"More fun for two to watch than one."

"No, really, I'd rather wait alone." He had an idea how to persuade her. He took his key from his pocket and handed it to her. "Go home to my place and wait for me. If Barbie phones like you said, you'll be there to take the message."

He watched the Mini gun down the street and swing abruptly onto Bayswater Road, then he crossed over to the hotel, pushed open the glass door, and went inside. The lobby was simply the former living room with a narrow reception desk added. The rest of the furniture looked like the original pieces. Through a doorway he could see a bar in the adjoining room.

The desk clerk was a young Asian in a pale-blue suit, white shirt, and maroon bow tie. "Sir?"

"I'm looking for a Miss Barbara Birtles. Could you tell me if she's registered?" He spelled the name while the clerk ran down the guest list. When they drew a blank, he asked for Lucy Feather but she wasn't staying at the hotel, either.

"Is it all right if I buy a drink in your bar?"

"We welcome the public, sir."

Birtles went next door, ordered a large whisky, and took it to a

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seat where he could watch the foot of the staircase in the lobby. His mind began to wander—so far that he almost missed the girl when she appeared. It was the splendid thighs in tight, expensive denim that caught his attention. Lucy Feather was in the lobby, holding out her hand, waiting for someone to come down the stairs and join her.

The companion turned out to be a Eurasian, one of the most handsome men Birtles had ever seen. He was in his early thirties, lean and muscular in white slacks and an open-necked shirt. His black hair swept in a wave across his broad forehead above widely spaced almond eyes.

It was the color of the eyes that shook Birtles. In that creamy coffee face, they were a pale, transparent blue. Birtles could have believed they were contact lenses worn for some spectacular stage effect. The man clasped hands with Lucy and they went out into the gathering darkness.

His heart pounding, Birtles tossed back his drink and hurried after them. They were walking not far ahead, the Feather girl in flat shoes, her hips rolling provocatively, her loose-limbed companion padding beside her like some jungle animal. He stopped an approaching stranger, an American-looking youth, and said something. The young man produced a lighter and put a flame to the Eurasian's cigarette. Birtles noticed the American's face as he continued on and thought he looked dazed, as if he had been spoken to by a movie star. It must have been those eyes.

The couple went into a pub on the corner. Birtles gave them a minute to settle themselves, then followed them in. They were still at the bar. He worked his way through at the far end and ordered a pint. By the time it had been pulled and paid for, they were sitting on an upholstered bench, part of an island arrangement in the middle of the room.

Birtles was able to find a place to sit where his back was to them. He could make out only part of what was being said. The Eurasian had a quiet voice; his remarks to Lucy Feather came across as those of a patient father handling a difficult child. "It can be done," he said at one point. "Anything can be done." And later: "Isn't it enough just to go and let them wonder?"

Lucy's voice rose after a few minutes. "No, I can't. I was riding her a couple of days ago. You'll have to."

He felt his stomach tighten. A few days ago she was in his daughter's room, he had heard the hectoring voices through the wall. Was

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that what Lucy was referring to—had she been riding Barbie, nagging her about going to India? If so, what was it her companion would have to do?

Birtles stood and carried his glass on a wide circle so that he approached them from the bar. He managed to look surprised when his eyes met Lucy's, and before anything was said he slipped onto the bench beside her.

"Hello, Lucy. You don't recognize me. I'm Norman Birtles, Barbie's father."

"Yes, of course." She was nervous. Her big, moist lips grimaced over perfect teeth. She tossed her head and her bound-up hair shook like a horse's mane. "This is my friend, Ezra Monty."

Monty gave Birtles a warm handshake. The blue crystal eyes met his and Birtles felt penetrated. He felt studied and stripped down and emptied out, but the surprising part of it was he didn't mind. A lot of casual conversation was going on and he couldn't have remembered a word of it.

"Well," Lucy was saying as he began to emerge from his stupor, "funny to run into you here. Quite a coincidence."

"I used to live around here," Birtles improvised. "I come back sometimes to see the old neighborhood." They knew he was lying. There was an attentiveness around the table and Birtles imagined heads lifting in the jungle, nostrils sniffing the air.

"I'm worried about Barbie," he said to Lucy. "She left home the other night. I woke up in the morning and she was gone. With all her stuff."

"I understood she was leaving for Canada."

"Not till next week. And she'd never go without saying goodbye."

"Maybe she changed her mind. Maybe she just decided to go."

"Silently?" Birtles demanded. "In the dead of night?" He implied it was the sort of thing Lucy Feather might do to her parents, but not his daughter.

Monty leaned across Lucy and touched Birtles on the arm. "I understand your concern," he said. "I have many contacts in all sorts of places, I travel a good deal. Barbara Birtles—Lucy will give me a description. I'll put out the word. Don't worry, sir. We'll find your daughter."

It was an incredible sensation—Birtles felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from him. Ezra Monty was in charge and everything was going to be all right.

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"And now—" Monty glanced at a sliver of gold on his wrist "—we have something we must attend to. Lucy?"

They were on their way out the door when the spell wore off and Birtles realized he mustn't lose them. More than ever, he sensed there was a link here with Barbara. He tried to drink some beer, almost choked on it, got up, and hurried out onto the dark street.

The couple were climbing into a car a short distance up Inverness Avenue. Birtles lurked in the pub entrance and watched them drive away with Lucy at the wheel. When they turned onto Bayswater Road and headed west, he began looking for a taxi. A car horn tooted, attracted his attention. It was Anitra in the Mini, cruising slowly toward him.

He climbed in beside her and slammed the door. "Bless your heart, I told you to go home."

"I thought you might need help."

"Turn right." She turned, causing a double-decker bus to brake and sound its horn. "There's a black Volvo ahead, can you see it?"

"In this traffic?"

"It's Lucy Feather and her boy friend. I talked to them in the pub. I have a feeling they're hiding something."

After driving as far as Notting Hill, Anitra said, "They could have gone anywhere. They might be on the way to the airport."

"I didn't see any luggage. They may be going to her place. Stop here." Birtles ran to a call box and checked the telephone directory. He found a Feather listed on Southside Common in Wimbledon. Back in the car, he gave Anitra the address and she took off. "Do me a favor," he said. "Keep me alive for a while longer."

Anitra's ability to cover the ground brought them to the Feather residence in record time. It was a three-storey gabled house that bespoke generations of money, probably starting with dividends from the East India Company. There was no black Volvo in sight.

"It was Heathrow like I said," Anitra predicted.

"Once around the Green," Birtles told her.

She took it easy and when they turned back onto Southside the Volvo was there. Anitra pulled over, engine off, lights out. Lucy got out of the car ahead and Ezra Monty followed, both easing the doors shut.

"Why are they acting like that? Isn't it her house?"

"It could be anything," Birtles said. Their movements as they left the car and crept down a laneway beside the house filled him with fear. They were like a military patrol out to silence an enemy po-

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sition. During the drive he had told Anitra about the conversation in the pub. Now he said: "They might even have Barbie locked up here."

"Kidnaping? Is that possible? How would they have got her out of your place at night without your hearing them?"

Several minutes went by. Through the open window, Birtles could smell the delicious freshness from the Common, all those trees breathing in the night. Now there was movement at the entrance to the lane. Lucy ran out, turned and beckoned—she seemed impatient, in a state of high excitement. Monty followed and stood in front of the girl, put his hands on her shoulders, and shook her gently.

Her head fell back, and in the streetlight Birtles saw her eyes closed, her mouth open. If she had just inhaled some intoxicating substance, this would have been her reaction.

Monty fed her into the car and closed the door. He ran around and got in at the driver's side, switched on, and drove away. Birtles touched Anitra's shoulder and she began to drive ahead slowly. As they passed the laneway, he noticed something on the pavement. "Stop!" he told her and when she did he jumped out. By the time she parked and joined him, he was examining a dark wet smear on the concrete. He touched it and lifted his stained finger. "Blood," he said.

"Oh, God, get the police."

"I have to know. Have you got a flashlight in the car?" She ran away and brought it to him. He aimed its dim light at the ground and walked down the lane. Anitra kept close enough to touch a hand to his back every now and then.

They came to an outbuilding. The main house was a dark mass to the right. He saw grass, a concrete birdbath, rose bushes. The door was open in the shed beside him. As Birtles moved into the doorway, he smelled the pungent odor of a stable. He flashed the light over the board partitions of a stall, a leather harness on a hook, brass fittings, a saddle—then, on the stone floor, the body of a horse lying on its side. The animal was not quite dead—a leg kicked convulsively.

"Stay back." Birtles moved in closer, felt beneath his feet the pool of blood that Monty had tracked to the street, saw the gaping opening where the broad chestnut neck had been cut through. "Insane," he whispered. "They're both insane . . ."

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When they were driving again, he told Anitra to take him back to the hotel. She wanted to get the police but he said he was only concerned about his daughter and if they wasted one minute they might lose Feather and Monty. "I think they came out here to do this and now they'll be on their way."

"That must have been her own horse. Why would she kill it?"

"I don't know. In the pub she said, 'I was riding her a couple of days ago.' I thought she meant arguing with Barbie." Birtles nursed his fear as Anitra gunned down quiet roads.

When they arrived at the Candide, they found the Volvo parked outside. Anitra pulled in and idled. "The police?" she said plaintively. "Can we have the police now, please?"

"O.K. I'll get out and watch. You drive to the police station—there must be one near here. If you see a cop on the street, stop and tell him."

Birtles got out and positioned himself where he could watch the hotel entrance. The Mini wheeled down the street and turned the corner. Almost immediately, the glass door was pushed open by Monty carrying a couple of expensive-looking suitcases. Lucy Feather followed with a zippered flight bag. Monty loaded the luggage expertly, closed the trunk, and went to join Lucy in the front seat.

Birtles had to make up his mind. He ran forward, opened the back door, and slid inside just as the car pulled away.

Lucy glanced at him in the rearview mirror as she moved into traffic. "You again! What gives?"

"That's what I intend to find out. Why did you kill your horse?"

Her voice hardened. "Take care of him."

Monty turned and gave Birtles a look of admiration. "Were you out *there* tonight?"

"I'm looking for my daughter. I'm convinced you two know where she is."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I found a Candide Hotel envelope in her room with some pot in it. And when I came down here I ran into you and Lucy. Lucy visited Barbara a few days ago—I heard them arguing in her room."

"He's quite a detective, Luce. He's a determined man. I like that."

"All right," Lucy said. "I gave Barbara some stuff when I went to pick up the book. We argued because I wanted her to come with us but she wouldn't."

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"End of story," Monty said. "We know nothing about your daughter, Mr. Birtles."

"I think you do. Anyway, we're going to have it out. My girl friend went to get the police."

Lucy gave him a contemptuous glance. "That's pathetic. Do you know who this is? I told you Ezra Monty—his real name is Eric Merlot. You know the book I got from Barbara? It's about him."

Birtles had read the book, had glanced at a couple of badly reproduced photos in the centerfold. This could be the man.

"He's killed eleven people already. You mean nothing to him. He'll blow you away as soon as look at you. Where shall we go, Eric? Out in the country?"

Merlot laughed and patted her shoulder. "She's my greatest admirer. When she heard there was a book about me, she had to get a copy right away." He became serious. "Nobody's killed anybody here and nobody's going to. This is England, not India. I said I like you, Mr. Birtles. Barbara's a lucky girl to have a father who cares about her as much as you do—I can tell you that from experience. And I can see the same qualities in you that I like in her."

"You've seen her then."

"Of course I have. I was keeping quiet because she asked me to. She's agreed to come east and work for me. I provide a service for young people traveling out there and Barbara would be ideal."

Birtles looked at the handsome face watching him across the upholstered seat. Those pale eyes caught what little light there was—all he could see was intelligent, honest, friendly eyes. "She never said anything to me."

"She wouldn't. She cares about your feelings. I'm offering her glamour, excitement, her own apartment in one of the nicer hotels in Singapore. That beats a cubbyhole bedroom with Daddy listening through the kitchen wall."

Nobody spoke for a few seconds. Then Birtles said: "You've been in my house, Mr. Merlot. When was that?"

"Eric, you're going to have to kill him. This is getting worse."

"Just drive the car. Mr. Birtles is an intelligent man. Sir, I'll admit I was there. We came in the other night using Barbara's key. She sent us to get her backpack. She'd decided to come with me. O.K.? I've told you the truth."

"And her traveler's checks. You got those too."

"Of course. She said not to forget her traveler's checks."

"But one thing still doesn't fit. Even if Barbara had decided to go

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with you she would have told me. But she hasn't, and that means something's wrong."

"Eric?" Lucy said in a voice that combined a supplication and a warning.

"And if she's going with you to Singapore, how come you two are driving away without her?"

Merlot laughed. The laugh announced that Birtles was the most entertaining company he'd encountered in a long time. "I'm going to have to give you the rest of it. Barbara wanted your feelings spared—that's why you haven't heard from her. The fact is, she and I met through Lucy and there was this physical thing between us. Can you understand that? She moved in at the hotel and all she cared about was— Well, *two* things. She also loved what I gave her to smoke. She's been stoned out of her mind for the past three days."

Birtles waited. Yes, he could believe any woman might become infatuated with Eric Merlot. He hated the idea of Barbie falling into that existence. But right now all he wanted was to find her and see that she was all right.

"I decided," Merlot continued, "that the best thing for me to do was disappear. Since she's so young. So I left her in the room at the Candide—I paid for another couple of days in advance. When she wakes up and sorts herself out, she'll come home. And, Mr. Birtles, please don't tell her where I've gone."

The car slowed down and halted at a traffic light. "I've been told so many things," Birtles said. "First, you were taking her to Singapore. Now you've left her and she doesn't know you've gone. It could all be lies."

"Shut up," Lucy snapped. "Just shut your mouth and get out of the car." She pulled on the hand brake, leaving herself free to sprawl back over the seat and open the back door. "Just get out and go away. And consider yourself lucky."

Birtles got out. He slammed the back door and opened the front door beside Merlot. He put an arm lock on the younger man's head and dragged him from the car. "You're going, too," he said. "I want you with me until I find my daughter."

The light changed. They were in one of the middle lanes and Birtles had to dodge cars as traffic began to move. Lucy had no choice but to drive on. When they reached the sidewalk, Merlot laughed in a high shrill voice. "Fabulous!" he screamed. "You incredible sonofabitch, that's the sort of thing I'd do!"

He was still laughing when they reached an Underground station.

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As they went down the steps, Merlot's arm firmly held by Birtles, the Eurasian said: "That's how I got away from the police in Rajasthan. Impulse. A window was open, so I climbed through and ran across a yard and out the gate. You keep your eyes open and you take quick, decisive action."

They missed a Central Line train heading east and had to wait on a deserted platform. Merlot glanced at the hand locked onto his upper arm. "Getting tired?" he asked. "I know how hard it is to hold somebody who doesn't want to be held. That's why I use a lot of drugs. You should buy me a coffee and put a few capsules in it."

Birtles pushed Merlot onto a bench and knelt before him. He took his right foot in both hands and twisted sharply. "Oh, Christ, no—" Merlot groaned. The bone snapped and Birtles released the foot.

"Now you won't run," he said. "Not on a broken ankle."

Merlot threw his head back so hard it hit the tiled wall. His eyes were glazed. "Sadistic bastard, you didn't have to do that."

"I think I did. Anyway, you killed that horse, don't talk to me about sadism."

Merlot struggled to get a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose. "Want to know why we killed the horse? It was Lucy's idea. She's worse than both of us put together."

A train was approaching. Birtles drew Merlot up and supported him on the lame side. They boarded the train and the doors closed. They sat on a double seat.

"The horse," Merlot said. "I needed money and Lucy got it for me by selling some of her parents' things. Her father threatened to sell her horse to recoup the money. That was what made up her mind to come away with me. Before we left, she decided to kill the horse so they couldn't sell it."

"I think you two deserve each other," Birtles said grimly. "But God help the world if you should spawn."

Merlot laughed. "You think I'd marry or have children? Put more life into this rotten world? Have no fear."

When the train arrived at Queensway Station, Merlot's eyes were closed. As Birtles helped him onto the escalator, he asked: "How's the ankle?"

Merlot seemed still to be thinking of the absurdity of his marrying Lucy Feather. "She's just a contact for me in London—a source of money while I hide. A gang of English kids in Katmandu gave me her name. When I broke jail the last time, it gave me a place to come and stay."

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The three-block walk to the hotel took time. Merlot gritted his teeth and limped on. His weight was light but his slender, supple frame reminded Birtles of the aluminum tent poles he used to erect on camping trips. They were practically unbreakable.

Approaching the Candide, he kept a lookout for a police presence. There was no sign of vehicles or uniformed men. Of course, Merlot had been gone for some time—Anitra would have returned with the police to be told their man had checked out. By now she and the police would be on the way to the airport.

Inside the hotel, on the stairs to his first-floor room, Merlot said: "Your daughter is O.K., I promise you that. When you're satisfied, will you let me go?"

"All I care about is Barbie," Birtles said. But did he mean that? The man on his shoulder was a murderer, escaped from police custody. He was a psychopath, capable of killing a horse with a knife. How could he be let free? He was smug and confident, holding in contempt the laws and the society that Birtles had supported all his life. "I don't care about you," he added.

"Then we understand each other," Merlot said in a quiet voice with just a trace of an edge.

Merlot had kept his key. As he unlocked the door of his room, he glanced at Birtles and read the inquiry in his eyes. "There was no way Lucy was getting on that plane. I was going to give her the key and send her back to take care of Barbara. O.K.?"

They went inside where Merlot snapped on a light and closed the door. It turned out to be a small suite. He indicated a closed door. "She's in the bedroom."

"You, too," Birtles said, pulling Merlot with him.

Merlot opened the door and Birtles went into the bedroom. He saw a familiar shape in the bed, recognized the curly head on the pillow even in near darkness. He left the limping man and hurried to the bed. As he bent over her, Merlot turned on a lamp. The light fell on Barbie's face, undamaged but passive as a sculpture.

"Barbie? Love?" Birtles touched her cheek. There was warmth. "Are you all right?"

Her eyelids flickered, raised—she saw him and immediately there were tears. "Oh, it's you," she slurred. "Daddy, I was hoping you'd come—"

"I'm here now. You'll be O.K."

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"They gave me drugs. They wanted my money. I couldn't phone, I couldn't move or do anything."

"I'll get a doctor for you. We'll have you home in no time."

"Daddy, I'm not going away. I'm going to stay with you—"

"Shhhh." She had reverted to the school girl who used to feign illness so she could stay home in bed where he would bring her lunch on a tray and the deck of cards for a game of rummy. "We'll talk about it when you're better."

He heard the bedroom door close, heard the snap of a key in the lock. He got up and ran to the door. "Merlot, don't be crazy!"

"She's O.K., right? That's my side of the bargain. I don't trust you, Mr. Birtles—I'm off."

"You'll get nowhere on that ankle."

"Pain is all in the mind. I've turned off worse than this when I had to."

Birtles hit the door with his fist. It was old-fashioned, a solid, heavy panel. "Merlot—!"

"I've been in three jails and got out every time. You never had a hope of holding me." His voice drew away. "Goodbye, Mr. Birtles, you'll never see me again. Too bad—I like you." The outer door closed.

Birtles went back to the bed. "Barbie, I'm going to make some noise. I have to break the door. Don't worry, I'll be back soon."

She gave him the wise, mature smile—his mother encouraging him to do his best. He went back to the door and balanced himself. It took five lunges to put his boot through the panel. A minute later, he was outside and running for the stairs.

The lobby was deserted, nobody on duty at the desk. Merlot was crafty enough to be hiding somewhere inside, but Birtles decided to have a quick look on the street. Self-hypnosis or whatever, he couldn't be covering the ground very quickly.

Outside, he saw a crowd gathering at the corner of Bayswater Road. He stared and could hardly believe his eyes when he made out what looked to be the familiar blue Mini. Running in that direction, he picked out Anitra Colahan's peach coiffure glistening under the street lamp in the midst of the crowd.

He reached her and when she saw him she took his arm for support. "Oh, God, he ran right in front of the car! You weren't here when I got back with the police. I was cruising the neighborhood looking

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for you. I turned the corner and he was running across—not running, limping."

"It's O.K." Birtles looked down, saw the pale-blue eyes staring. Somebody would have to close them for him now. "That's Merlot, the man who was holding Barbara. They drugged her to rob her. He's killed a lot of people."

Anitra turned away. A police car was pulling up. "Here they come," she said grimly. "Three tries to get my license and now I'm going to lose it."

Birtles looked from her to the dead man and back at her angry face. All right, so there were signs all around that it was indeed the selfish, imperfect world Merlot believed it to be. Not so long ago it was a jungle and people were eating each other.

"When you've given the cops your statement," he said, "come back to the hotel. I'll be with Barbie, waiting for the doctor. When she's taken care of, you can drive me home."

As he walked away, Birtles realized he'd just told Anitra that he loved her.

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a *NEW* Selena Mead story by

PATRICIA McGERR

In the June 1983 issue of The Writer, *there was an article by Patricia McGerr defining the strategy, when writing a short detective story, of starting with a solution, then working back to create the puzzle. She has obviously followed that method here, with the usual excellent results—the tidy, humorous, intelligent entertainment that is Patricia McGerr's hallmark . . .*

Selena looked at Hugh, expecting him to protest, but he responded with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, reminding her of an agency rule. When the inexplicable occurs, do nothing and wait for an explanation . . .

CARIBBEAN CLUES

by PATRICIA McGERR

Selena was at her desk paying bills when Hugh came in and dropped an illustrated folder on top of her checkbook.

"Look that over," he said. "It's time we had a vacation."

"Vacation?"

She glanced at the red-letter headline—*Six Sun-Filled Fun-Filled Days in the Caribbean*—then raised her eyes to regard her husband with skepticism. "While I bask in the sun, what will you be doing for Section Q?"

"Nothing consequential. A little courier duty."

"Really? I know budgets are being cut all over Washington, but I didn't think it had reached the point where agency heads have to run their own errands."

"What's the good of being chief," he countered, "if I can't give myself a plum assignment? Read the brochure. Look at the pictures.

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It's a great trip. A quarter hour for business and the rest of the week to enjoy ourselves. Aren't you tempted?"

"I might be." The cover picture was of scantily clad couples holding tall glasses and reclining in deck chairs around a sun-drenched pool. It was in sharp contrast to the snow and ice and blistering winds outside their door. "But only if you tell me the real reason for the trip."

"I have a piece of paper to deliver, that's all."

"That's not all." She swiveled her chair to look at him directly. "This is a secret operation and it's important enough, or risky enough, for you to go yourself. If I'm to be involved, even if only as part of your cover as a cruising couple, I've a right to know what I'm walking—or sailing—into."

"In intelligence work," he reminded her, "nobody has rights. Information is given on a need-to-know basis and for this trip you only need to know what to pack."

"I can refuse to go."

"And send me off alone?" He grinned at her. "They say these cruise ships are filled with seductive females lying in wait for unattached men."

"In that case you might like to withdraw your invitation."

"What do you say we compromise?" Hugh said. "I'll give you a rough outline of the mission and you do without names or specific details."

"Very well," she agreed. "Just tell me what's on the paper and to whom you're going to deliver it."

"O.K., here's the plan." He sat down, pulling the chair closer to her desk. "Next Friday we'll fly to Miami and sail from there. The ship stops in four ports. During the second stop, a leader of the resistance forces of one of the Latin American countries will come aboard. There's a heavy price on his head, so his movements must be kept top secret. Going myself keeps the people who know about the meeting to a minimum."

"And when you meet, what then?"

"I have a list of names to give him and a map. People who are sympathetic to the cause, and dates and places where they will make contact. Once delivery is made, he'll get off the ship and my job is ended. You see, it's a very simple operation."

"You make it sound that way," she conceded, then let enthusiasm override her misgivings. "All right, Hugh, I'd love to cruise the Caribbean with you."

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The first two days lived up to the brochure's promise. It was an unaccustomed luxury to wake in the morning with no plans, no appointments, no deadlines. They were free to concentrate on such important decisions as whether to take a brisk walk around the deck, play shuffleboard, or lie immobile and watch the smooth sea blend with an almost cloudless sky. In the evening they danced to the accompaniment of a five-piece band whose repertory bridged the generations from the waltz through ragtime to the latest hard rock. It was an idyllic time, the first extended period since their marriage that they could count on uninterrupted time together, their tranquility unbroken by newspapers or telephones. The single distraction was the list that Hugh was carrying with him. Soon, Selena told herself, he'll pass that on. Then we'll have the rest of the cruise to rest, relax, and enjoy each other.

Early in the morning of the third day the ship sailed into its first port. Many of the passengers boarded buses for a guided tour of the small island republic. Hugh and Selena chose to explore on their own, shop for souvenirs, and lunch at a restaurant recommended by friends. They were walking up the broad tree-lined avenue when a young boy, running fast, brushed Hugh's right hip and sped on to disappear up a side street.

"Your wallet!" Selena exclaimed. "Did he—"

"No, that's inside my coat. But I think—" he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a screwed-up paper "—yes, he left a message." Unfolding it he read the words, "Call your office."

"Trouble," Selena said. "I knew things were going too well."

"Not necessarily," he returned. "It may be a minor change of plans. I've been out of touch for two days."

They reversed their steps and went to the American consulate, where Hugh's credentials procured a private room with a secure phone. Selena drank coffee with the consul's wife while he made his call. Soon he joined them, looking grim.

"Bad news?" she asked when, having declined an invitation to lunch, they were outside the consulate.

"The worst." He said no more until they were seated on a bench in the center of a small park where they could talk without fear of eavesdroppers.

"Raul," he told her then, "has been taken."

"Raul? Is that the man you're supposed to meet?"

"Yes. Word reached headquarters yesterday that he was caught in an ambush and delivered to the security police."

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"Then your meeting is cancelled."

"Not exactly. According to our source—an informer with links to the security forces—his capture has been kept secret. He was compelled, probably under torture, to give them full details of tomorrow's rendezvous. They're sending one of their own people in his place."

"Then you can at least be thankful that you found out in time. I gather it would be unfortunate if the data you're carrying went to the other side."

"A disaster," he confirmed. "In the wrong hands, my list would endanger some very good men."

"Will you meet the impostor or just let him dangle?"

"Oh, I'll keep the appointment. But I'll draw up a new list of names. Men who are solidly behind the government, some with important jobs. If we can start them distrusting each other, that will salvage something from Raul's loss. Come on." He rose from the bench, cheered by the thought of counterattack. "We'll have to have a quick lunch or we'll miss the sailing."

After returning to the ship, Hugh went at once to their stateroom to prepare a counterfeit message for the counterfeit Raul. Selena stayed on deck to watch the liner maneuver through the harbor's narrow passage while young islanders dove for coins tossed by the passengers.

Hugh had finished his work by the time she went down to dress for dinner, but with habitual caution they did not speak of it while in their cabin or later in the dining salon.

They were finishing dinner when the room's lights dimmed and the pastry chef emerged from the galley bearing aloft a cake lighted by candles.

"Somebody's birthday," Selena guessed as, with everyone's eyes upon him, he carried his sparkling burden toward the corner where they sat. A waiter followed with a bottle of champagne and, from the opposite direction, one of the ship's musicians, guitar in hand, came to meet them. Stopping at Selena and Hugh's table, the chef, with a flourish, placed the cake before them, the waiter uncorked the champagne, and the guitarist began to play and sing the "Anniversary Waltz." Other voices, scattered around the room, joined him.

Our anniversary was last month, Selena thought. They've come to the wrong table. I hope they can correct the mistake without too much embarrassment. She looked at Hugh, expecting him to protest,

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but he responded with an almost imperceptible shake of his head, reminding her of an agency rule. When the inexplicable occurs, do nothing and wait for an explanation.

As the song ended, the cruise director stepped forward to hand Hugh a white envelope.

"Happy anniversary, Mr. and Mrs. Pierce," she said. "This message came through shortly before dinner and the radio operator tipped us off. I hope you don't mind our holding it back in order to arrange the surprise."

"It was indeed a surprise." Hugh's glance circled the foursome—chef, waiter, guitarist, and cruise director. "My wife and I are very grateful. Will you blow out the candles, darling?"

"It was most kind of you." Selena smiled at them, took a deep breath, and bent toward the cake. The candles flickered and went out and the other diners applauded. The waiter poured the champagne, Selena cut the cake, and the staff members, satisfied with the celebration's success, left them alone.

Hugh tore open the envelope and, with unchanging expression, read the message silently and passed it to Selena. It was brief. "Happy Anniversary. Love from Sophie, Craig, and Doris." The greeting, she assumed, was camouflage. The coded message was in the signatures.

"Sophie, Craig, and Doris," she repeated.

"Yes, aren't they the thoughtful ones." Leaning close, his mouth at her ear, Hugh translated. "Source credibility doubtful."

"Oh." For the benefit of anyone still watching, she smiled demurely and lowered her eyes.

While they ate the cake and sipped the wine, she thought about the message. The source referred to must be the informer who had reported Raul's capture and replacement. That he should be of dubious credibility was not surprising. Informers are often turned into double agents. If they discovered he was sending reports to Section Q, they might well use him to feed us misinformation. But what would be the point of saying Raul was in custody if it wasn't true?

"Congratulations, you two." Passing their table with his wife in tow, a fellow passenger interrupted her thoughts. "How long since you tied the knot?"

"Fifteen years," Hugh answered.

"Let's hope you have fifteen more," he said heartily and moved on.

He was the first of a stream of well-wishers who followed them

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from the dining room, eager to help them celebrate the fictitious anniversary. They bought them drinks, offered toasts, shook Hugh's hand, kissed Selena.

"Next time," she suggested when they had a moment's privacy, "tell your colleagues to send condolences."

"I think," he returned, "it's time for the happy couple to take a walk in the moonlight."

They escaped from the lounge, climbed to the next deck, and walked back to the dark deserted swimming pool. There Selena was at last able to ask her question.

"If they somehow found out about Raul's mission," he explained, "but weren't able to stop him, they could plant the impostor story to block his getting the information we have for him."

"And if you give the real Raul the wrong list of names and the resistance goes to them expecting to find friends—"

"Exactly." He finished her sentence. "That would turn into a trap for him and his fellow freedom fighters."

"Then it's lucky you learned about the trick before your meeting."

"If it is a trick," he said somberly. "The message doesn't say that our source has been proved a liar, only that his credibility is doubtful. The conclusion is that the information he sent us may or may not be accurate."

"So the man coming tomorrow may or may not be Raul. Then the only safe course is to give him nothing."

"That's how it appears." He frowned, shook his head. "But if it *is* Raul, he will have taken great risks to come here. If I send him away empty-handed, all his efforts, the dangers he's faced, will be for nothing."

"There must be some way to check his identity. Aren't there pictures of him?"

"Yes, I've seen his picture. I've also seen Diego, the man they say is coming in his place. They're cousins and they look very much alike. That's one of the tragedies of civil war. It splits families. And that lets them send in a ringer who can easily pass for the man we're expecting. You can be sure he'll have all the right IDs and be fully briefed on what to say and do."

"You say you've seen pictures of both of them?"

"Pictures of Raul," he corrected. "Diego I've seen in person. So have you."

"I've seen Diego? When? Where?"

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"About three years ago. Remember we went a few times to a nightclub on M street near Wisconsin?"

"Jazz-o-mania?"

"That's the one," he said. "It's out of business now. You know how those spots come and go. But the music was good. Diego was on the drums."

"So he's lived in Washington."

"Not for long. After the club failed, he had a couple of other jobs but finally gave up and went home. They tell me he has his own band now and plays for all the official functions."

"But he's not part of the government?"

"No, his interest is music not politics. The only reason for using him as messenger is the family resemblance."

"And they'd have the same reason for giving his name as substitute if the report is a hoax. There must be some way to distinguish between them."

"I'm sure there is," Hugh agreed. "Given enough time, we could uncover the differences. But H-hour is noon tomorrow. By then I have to decide whether to give him the right list, the wrong list, or no list at all."

The ship docked at its second port at ten o'clock the next morning. Since most of the passengers would spend the day ashore, the company had sold vouchers to island residents and tourists that entitled them to a tour of the ship and buffet lunch. The arrangement supplied protective cover for the Section Q-arranged rendezvous. The scenario called for Raul to come aboard with the touring party and, shortly before noon, to go to the Carib Bar and order a drink. To assure recognition, he was to wear a bright-orange shirt decorated with brown ponies. Hugh would take the stool next to his and identify himself by ordering a quinine and gin. While sipping their drinks, they would exchange comments on the weather or other small talk appropriate to strangers at a bar. And Hugh would inconspicuously pass on the list of names.

"That means I'll have approximately ten minutes to judge whether I'm talking to Raul or Diego," Hugh told Selena as they stood at the rail on the top deck watching the visitors come aboard. He shook his head.

"There ought to be something you could ask him," Selena said. "A question to which only Raul would know the answer."

"Too bad it's not the other way around," he returned. "If Raul

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were trying to pass as Diego, I might stump him with a musical question. But as things stand, there's no way—"

"Maybe there is," she interrupted. "There just may be."

"You've an idea?"

"I'm not sure but—yes, it might work. Anyway, it's worth a try." She turned from the rail and started away.

"Where are you going? What's your plan?"

"There's no time to explain. But I'll see you in a few minutes. Outside the Carib Bar."

Her first stop was the purser's office to ask where to find the guitarist.

"He may have gone ashore," he told her, "but I doubt it. He's probably resting in his cabin. Number 721 on B deck. Or there may be a card game going in the crew lounge."

She hurried to the cabin, knocked, and waited tensely until the shirt-sleeved young man opened the door.

"Mrs. Pierce." His tone showed surprise.

"I don't believe I thanked you properly for serenading us last night."

"Your husband did. He was very generous."

"I'm glad to hear it. Because I've come to ask another favor." She improvised quickly. "Actually, the celebration was a day early. This is our real anniversary. And there's a tune that has special meaning for us. *Rhapsody in Blue.* Can you play it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then can you come right away to the Carib Bar? My husband's on his way there and I—oh, I know I must sound terribly sentimental—"

"Not at all. I'm happy to be involved in a romantic plot. Just let me get my jacket."

"I'll go on ahead," she said, "and meet you there."

She took the elevator to the Promenade Deck and looked in the small bar. There were two customers, seated at opposite ends of the counter. One was an elderly passenger, the other a dark man in an orange shirt speckled with small brown horses. She waited in the doorway for the guitarist.

"Will you sit in that alcove, please?" She indicated a spot on the other side of the room. Crossing with him, she spoke again as they passed behind the orange shirt. "I'd love to hear you play Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue.*"

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"Rhapsody in Blue," he repeated. "You've got it."

He sat down, strummed a few introductory notes, then began the familiar melody. Selena glanced at her watch. Two minutes to twelve.

She slipped out the other door to meet Hugh on deck.

"You have the lists?"

"Both of them. The right one here." He patted his shirt pocket. "And the other here." He touched his belt.

"I'll stand where you can see my signal. Ask him to name that tune."

"You think he'll give himself away? He's not that stupid. I don't—"

"Trust me."

"It appears," he said, "I have no choice."

She waited on deck until Hugh was seated on the bar stool, then followed him inside. Passing the guitar player, she gave him an encouraging smile, then stationed herself close enough to the bar to hear the conversation. She was behind the orange-shirted man, out of his sight, but in Hugh's line of vision.

"This is the best drink in hot weather," Hugh opened the conversation when the barman put down his quinine and gin.

"I prefer rum," the other returned, "in any weather."

"That's good, too," Hugh agreed. He picked up his glass, took a long sip, and seemed for the first time to become aware of the music. "I've heard that tune before, but I can't put a name to it. Do you recognize it?"

"Sorry. I don't know anything about American music."

Hugh glanced toward Selena. She put out her hand, thumb turned downward. He frowned, looking dubious. She repeated the gesture and he shrugged, accepting her judgment. He picked up a cocktail napkin and pressed it to his belt as if wiping off dripped liquid, then returned the crumpled napkin to the bar, near his companion's glass. A few seconds later the other man picked up both glass and napkin. He drained the glass and wiped his lips with the napkin while palming the paper Hugh had placed inside it.

"I hope you enjoy the rest of your cruise," he said politely as he got off the stool.

"Thanks," Hugh said. "Nice talking to you."

Selena watched him leave the bar, then took his place beside Hugh.

"I hope you understand what just happened," he told her. "Because I don't."

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"That was Diego," she answered positively, "and you gave him the false list."

"I grant you that Diego would be suspicious of a musical clue and try to protect himself by pretending ignorance. But Raul would be genuinely ignorant. So how did that tell us which one it was?"

"Because I made sure he heard the title before our friend began to play. He knew it was *Rhapsody in Blue* and Raul would have told you so. Only Diego, needing to hide his identity, would deny his knowledge. And now your work is done, so let's thank the musician for playing our song."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

HAMMERING IT OUT

by ALVIN S. FICK

"She's tacky," said her husband, "her clothes, her taste, her manner.
"Tacky are her relatives, her voice, her hair, her grammar."
Lester chanted on and on, abusing kind sweet Grace,
Until at last the day arrived he told her to her face:
"You're tacky, dear, and I despise you, tacky top to toe.
"I've had as much as I can stand—I fear you have to go."
"Oh, no," said Grace, "you have it wrong—your logic's warped and bent—
"Some time ago I made *my* plan. *You* go." And off he went.
How many times he'd muttered, "Do it before she gets worse,"
But in the end it was Lester a-riding in the hearse.
The cops soon came to fetch dear Grace and throw her in the slammer.
As they rode off she held aloft her tacky tacky hammer.

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an Edgar-winning short story by

FREDERICK FORSYTH

In May of last year, Frederick Forsyth was awarded an Edgar by the Mystery Writers of America for writing what they judged to be the best mystery short story published in the United States in 1982, "There Are No Snakes in Ireland." The story first appeared in a collection of Mr. Forsyth's stories, No Comebacks*—a collection we heartily recommend to you. As for this particular story, we defy you to read it through to its conclusion without experiencing pity and horror and a great many other disquieting emotions as well . . .*

THERE ARE NO SNAKES IN IRELAND

by FREDERICK FORSYTH

McQueen looked across his desk at the new applicant for a job with some skepticism. He had never employed such a one before. But he was not an unkind man, and if the job-seeker needed the money and was prepared to work, McQueen was not averse to giving him a chance.

"You know it's damn hard work?" he said in his broad Belfast accent.

"Yes sir," said the applicant.

"It's a quick in-and-out job, ye know. No questions, no pack drill. You'll be working on the lump. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Mr. McQueen."

"Well, it means you'll be paid well but you'll be paid in cash. No red tape. Geddit?"

What he meant was there would be no income-tax paid, no Na-

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tional Health contributions deducted at source. He might also have added that there would be no National Insurance cover and that the Health and Safety standards would be completely ignored. Quick profits for all were the order of the day, with a fat slice off the top for himself as the contractor. The job-seeker nodded his head to indicate he had "goddit" though in fact he had not. McQueen looked at him speculatively.

"You say you're a medical student, in your last year at the Royal Victoria?" Another nod. "On a summer vacation?"

Another nod. The applicant was evidently one of those students who needed money over and above his grant to put himself through medical school. McQueen, sitting in his dingy Bangor office running a hole-and-corner business as a demolition contractor with assets consisting of a battered truck and a ton of second-hand sledgehammers, considered himself a self-made man and heartily approved of the Ulster Protestant work ethic. He was not one to put down another such thinker, whatever he looked like.

"All right," he said, "you'd better take lodgings here in Bangor. You'll never get from Belfast and back in time each day. We work from seven in the morning until sundown. It's piecework by the hour, hard but well paid. Mention one word to the authorities and you'll lose the job like shit off a shovel. O.K.?"

"Yes, sir. Please, when do I start and where?"

"The truck picks the gang up at the main station yard every morning at six-thirty. Be there Monday morning. The gang foreman is Big Billie Cameron. I'll tell him you'll be there."

"Yes, Mr. McQueen." The applicant turned to go.

"One last thing," said McQueen, pencil poised. "What's your name?"

"Harkishan Ram Lal," said the student. McQueen looked at his pencil, the list of names in front of him, and the student.

"We'll call you Ram," he said, and that was the name he wrote down on the list.

The student walked out into the bright July sunshine of Bangor, on the north coast of County Down, Northern Ireland.

By that Saturday evening he had found himself cheap lodgings in a dingy boarding house halfway up Railway View Street, the heart of Bangor's bed-and-breakfast land. At least it was convenient to the main station from which the works truck would depart every morning just after sun-up. From the grimy window of his room he

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could look straight at the side of the shored embankment that carried the trains from Belfast into the station.

It had taken him several tries to get a room. Most of those houses with a B-and-B notice in the window seemed to be fully booked when he presented himself on the doorstep. But then it was true that a lot of casual labor drifted into the town in the height of summer. True also that Mrs. McGurk was a Catholic and she still had rooms left.

He spent Sunday morning bringing his belongings over from Belfast, most of them medical textbooks. In the afternoon he lay on his bed and thought of the bright hard light on the brown hills of his native Punjab. In one more year he would be a qualified physician, and after another year of intern work he would return home to cope with the sicknesses of his own people. Such was his dream. He calculated he could make enough money this summer to tide himself through to his finals and after that he would have a salary of his own.

On the Monday morning he rose at a quarter to six at the bidding of his alarm clock, washed in cold water, and was in the station yard just after six. There was time to spare. He found an early-opening café and took two cups of black tea. It was his only sustenance. The battered truck, driven by one of the demolition gang, was there at a quarter past six and a dozen men assembled near it. Harkishan Ram Lal did not know whether to approach them and introduce himself, or wait at a distance. He waited.

At twenty-five past the hour the foreman arrived in his own car, parked it down a side road, and strode up to the truck. He had McQueen's list in his hand. He glanced at the dozen men, recognized them all, and nodded. The Indian approached. The foreman glared at him.

"Is youse the darkie McQueen has put on the job?" he demanded.

Ram Lal stopped in his tracks. "Harkishan Ram Lal," he said. "Yes."

There was no need to ask how Big Billie Cameron had earned his name. He stood 6 feet and 3 inches in his stockings but was wearing enormous nail-studded, steel-toed boots. Arms like tree trunks hung from huge shoulders and his head was surmounted by a shock of ginger hair. Two small pale-lashed eyes stared down balefully at the slight and wiry Indian. It was plain he was not best pleased. He spat on the ground.

"Well, get in the fecking truck," he said.

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On the journey out to the work site Cameron sat up in the cab which had no partition dividing it from the back of the lorry, where the dozen laborers sat on two wooden benches down the sides. Ram Lal was near the tailboard next to a small, nut-hard man with bright blue eyes, whose name turned out to be Tommy Burns. He seemed friendly.

"Where are youse from?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

"India," said Ram Lal. "The Punjab."

"Well, which?" said Tommy Burns.

Ram Lal smiled. "The Punjab is a part of India," he said.

Burns thought about this for a while. "You Protestant or Catholic?" he asked at length.

"Neither," said Ram Lal patiently. "I am a Hindu."

"You mean you're not a Christian?" asked Burns in amazement.

"No. Mine is the Hindu religion."

"Hey," said Burns to the others, "your man's not a Christian at all." He was not outraged, just curious, like a small child who has come across a new and intriguing toy.

Cameron turned from the cab up front. "Aye," he snarled, "a heathen."

The smile dropped off Ram Lal's face. He stared at the opposite canvas wall of the truck. By now they were well south of Bangor, clattering down the motorway towards Newtownards. After a while Burns began to introduce him to the others. There was a Craig, a Munroe, a Patterson, a Boyd, and two Browns. Ram Lal had been long enough in Belfast to recognize the names as being originally Scottish, the sign of the hard Presbyterians who make up the backbone of the Protestant majority of the Six Counties. The men seemed amiable and nodded back at him.

"Have you not got a lunchbox, laddie?" asked the elderly man called Patterson.

"No," said Ram Lal, "it was too early to ask my landlady to make one up."

"You'll need lunch," said Burns, "aye, and breakfast. We'll be making tay ourselves on a fire."

"I will make sure to buy a box and bring some food tomorrow," said Ram Lal.

Burns looked at the Indian's rubber-soled soft boots. "Have you not done this kind of work before?" he asked.

Ram Lal shook his head.

"You'll need a pair of heavy boots. To save your feet, you see."

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Ram Lal promised he would also buy a pair of heavy ammunition boots from a store if he could find one open late at night. They were through Newtownards and still heading south on the A21 towards the small town of Comber. Craig looked across at him.

"What's your real job?" he asked.

"I'm a medical student at the Royal Victoria in Belfast," said Ram Lal. "I hope to qualify next year."

Tommy Burns was delighted. "That's near to being a real doctor," he said. "Hey, Big Billie, if one of us gets a knock young Ram could take care of it."

Big Billie grunted. "He's not putting a finger on me," he said.

That killed further conversation until they arrived at the work site. The driver had pulled northwest out of Comber and two miles up the Dundonald road he bumped down a track to the right until they came to a stop where the trees ended and saw the building to be demolished.

It was a huge old whiskey distillery, sheer-sided, long derelict. It had been one of two in these parts that had once turned out good Irish whiskey but had gone out of business years before. It stood beside the River Comber, which had once powered its great water-wheel as it flowed down from Dundonald to Comber and on to empty itself in Strangford Lough. The malt had arrived by horse-drawn cart down the track and the barrels of whiskey had left the same way. The sweet water that had powered the machines had also been used in the vats. But the distillery had stood alone, abandoned and empty for years.

Or course, the local children had broken in and found it an ideal place to play. Until one had slipped and broken a leg. Then the county council had surveyed it, declared it a hazard, and the owner found himself with a compulsory demolition order.

He, scion of an old family of squires who had known better days, wanted the job done as cheaply as possible. That was where McQueen came in. It could be done faster but more expensively with heavy machinery; Big Billie and his team would do it with sledges and crowbars. McQueen had even lined up a deal to sell the best timbers and the hundreds of tons of mature bricks to a jobbing builder. After all, the wealthy nowadays wanted their new houses to have "style" and that meant looking old. So there was a premium on antique sunbleached old bricks and genuine ancient timber beams to adorn the new-look-old "manor" houses of the top executives. McQueen would do all right.

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"Right, lads," said Big Billie as the truck rumbled away back to Bangor. "There it is. We'll start with the roof tiles. You know what to do."

The group of men stood beside their pile of equipment. There were great sledgehammers with 7-pound heads; crowbars 6 feet long and over an inch thick; nailbars a yard long with curved split tips for extracting nails; short-handled, heavy-headed lump hammers and a variety of timber saws. The only concessions to human safety were a number of webbing belts with dogclips and hundreds of feet of rope. Ram Lal looked up at the building and swallowed. It was four storeys high and he hated heights. But scaffolding is expensive.

One of the men unbidden went to the building, prised off a plank door, tore it up like a playing card, and started a fire. Soon a billycan of water from the river was boiling away and tea was made. They all had their enamel mugs except Ram Lal. He made a mental note to buy that also. It was going to be thirsty, dusty work. Tommy Burns finished his own mug and offered it, refilled, to Ram Lal.

"Do they have tea in India?" he asked.

Ram Lal took the proffered mug. The tea was ready-mixed, sweet and off-white. He hated it.

They worked through the first morning perched high on the roof. The tiles were not to be salvaged, so they tore them off manually and hurled them to the ground away from the river. There was an instruction not to block the river with falling rubble. So it all had to land on the other side of the building, in the long grass, weeds, broom, and gorse which covered the area round the distillery. The men were roped together so if one lost his grip and began to slither down the roof, the next man would take the strain. As the tiles disappeared, great yawning holes appeared between the rafters. Down below them was the floor of the top storey, the malt store.

At ten they came down the rickety internal stairs for breakfast on the grass, with another billycan of tea. Ram Lal ate no breakfast. At two they broke for lunch. The gang tucked into their piles of thick sandwiches. Ram Lal looked at his hands. They were nicked in several places and bleeding. His muscles ached and he was very hungry. He made another mental note about buying some heavy work gloves.

Tommy Burns held up a sandwich from his own box. "Are you not hungry, Ram?" he asked. "Sure, I have enough here."

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Big Billie from where he sat across the circle round the fire.

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Burns looked defensive. "Just offering the lad a sandwich," he said.

"Let the darkie bring his own fecking sandwiches," said Cameron. "You look after yourself."

The men looked down at their lunchboxes and ate in silence. It was obvious no one argued the toss with Big Billie.

"Thank you, I am not hungry," said Ram Lal to Burns. He walked away and sat by the river where he bathed his burning hands.

By sundown when the truck came to collect them, half the tiles on the great roof were gone. One more day and they would start on the rafters, work for saw and nailbar.

Throughout the week the work went on, and the once proud building was stripped of its rafters, planks, and beams until it stood hollow and open, its gaping windows like open eyes staring at the prospect of its imminent death. Ram Lal was unaccustomed to the arduousness of this kind of labor. His muscles ached endlessly, his hands were blistered, but he toiled on for the money he needed so badly.

He had acquired a tin lunchbox, enamel mug, hard boots, and a pair of heavy gloves, which no one else wore. Their hands were hard enough from years of manual work. Throughout the week Big Billie Cameron needled him without let-up, giving him the hardest work and positioning him on the highest points once he had learned Ram Lal hated heights. The Punjabi bit on his anger because he needed the money. The crunch came on the Saturday.

The timbers were gone and they were working on the masonry. The simplest way to bring the edifice down away from the river would have been to plant explosive charges in the corners of the side wall facing the open clearing. But dynamite was out of the question. It would have required special licenses in Northern Ireland of all places, and that would have alerted the tax man. McQueen and all his gang would have been required to pay substantial sums in income tax, and McQueen in National Insurance contributions. So they were chipping the walls down in square-yard chunks, standing hazardously on sagging floors as the supporting walls splintered and cracked under the hammers.

During lunch, Cameron walked round the building a couple of times and came back to the circle round the fire. He began to describe how they were going to bring down a sizable chunk of one other wall at third-floor level. He turned to Ram Lal.

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"I want you up on the top there," he said. "When it starts to go, kick it outwards."

Ram Lal looked up at the section of wall in question. A great crack ran along the bottom of it.

"That brickwork is going to fall at any moment," he said evenly. "Anyone sitting on top there is going to come with it."

Cameron stared at him, his face suffusing, his eyes pink with rage where they should have been white. "Don't you tell me my job; you do as you're told, you stupid fecking nigger." He turned and stalked away.

Ram Lal rose to his feet. When his voice came, it was in a hard-edged shout. "*Mister Cameron . . .* "

Cameron turned in amazement. The men sat open-mouthed. Ram Lal walked slowly up to the big ganger.

"Let us get one thing plain," said Ram Lal, and his voice carried clearly to everyone else in the clearing. "I am from the Punjab in Northern India. I am also a Kshatria, member of the warrior caste. I may not have enough money to pay for my medical studies, but my ancestors were soldiers and princes, rulers and scholars, two thousand years ago when yours were crawling on all fours dressed in skins. Please do not insult me any further."

Big Billie Cameron stared down at the Indian student. The whites of his eyes had turned a bright red. The other laborers sat in stunned amazement.

"Is that so?" said Cameron quietly. "Is that so, now? Well, things are a bit different now, you black bastard. So what are you going to do about that?"

On the last word he swung his arm, open-palmed, and his hand crashed into the side of Ram Lal's face. The youth was thrown bodily to the ground several feet away. His head sang. He heard Tommy Burns call out, "Stay down, laddie, Big Billie will kill you if you get up."

Ram Lal looked up into the sunlight. The giant stood over him, fists bunched. He realized he had not a chance in combat against the big Ulsterman. Feelings of shame and humiliation flooded over him. His ancestors had ridden, sword and lance in hand, across plains a hundred times bigger than these six counties, conquering all before them.

Ram Lal closed his eyes and lay still. After several seconds he heard the big man move away. A low conversation started among the others. He squeezed his eyes tighter shut to hold back the tears

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of shame. In the blackness he saw the baking plains of the Punjab and men riding over them; proud, fierce men, hook-nosed, bearded, turbaned, black-eyed, the warriors from the Land of Five Rivers.

Once, long ago in the world's morning, Iskander of Macedon had ridden over these plains with his hot and hungry eyes; Alexander, the young god, whom they called the Great, who at twenty-five had wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. These riders were the descendants of his captains, and the ancestors of Harkishan Ram Lal.

He was lying in the dust as they rode by, and they looked down at him in passing. As they rode, each of them mouthed one single word to him. Vengeance.

Ram Lal picked himself up in silence. It was done, and what still had to be done had to be done. That was the way of his people. He spent the rest of the day working in complete silence. He spoke to no one and no one spoke to him.

That evening in his room he began his preparations as night was about to fall. He cleared away the brush and comb from the battered dressing table and removed also the soiled doily and the mirror from its stand. He took his book of the Hindu religion and from it cut a page-size portrait of the great goddess Shakti, she of power and justice. This he pinned to the wall above the dressing table to convert it into a shrine.

He had bought a bunch of flowers from a seller in front of the main station, and these had been woven into a garland. To one side of the portrait of the goddess he placed a shallow bowl half filled with sand, and in the sand stuck a candle which he lit. From his suitcase he took a cloth roll and extracted half a dozen joss sticks. Taking a cheap, narrow-necked vase from the bookshelf, he placed them in it and lit the ends. The sweet, heady odor of the incense began to fill the room. Outside, big thunderheads rolled up from the sea.

When his shrine was ready he stood before it, head bowed, the garland in his fingers, and began to pray for guidance. The first rumble of thunder rolled over Bangor. He used not the modern Punjabi but the ancient Sanskrit, language of prayer.

"Devi Shakti . . . Maa . . . Goddess Shakti . . . great mother . . ."

The thunder crashed again and the first raindrops fell. He plucked the first flower and placed it in front of the portrait of Shakti.

"I have been grievously wronged. I ask vengeance upon the wrongdoer . . . " He plucked the second flower and put it beside the first.

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He prayed for an hour while the rain came down. It drummed on the tiles above his head, streamed down the window behind him. He finished praying as the storm subsided. He needed to know what form the retribution should take. He needed the goddess to send him a sign.

When he had finished, the joss sticks had burned themselves out and the room was thick with their scent. The candle guttered low. The flowers all lay on the lacquered surface of the dressing table in front of the portrait. Shakti stared back at him unmoved.

He turned and walked to the window to look out. The rain had stopped but everything beyond the panes dripped water. As he watched, a dribble of rain sprang from the guttering above the window and a trickle ran down the dusty glass, cutting a path through the grime. Because of the dirt it did not run straight but meandered sideways, drawing his eye farther and farther to the corner of the window as he followed its path. When it stopped he was staring at the corner of his room, where his dressing gown hung on a nail.

He noticed that during the storm the dressing-gown cord had slipped and fallen to the floor. It lay coiled upon itself, one knotted end hidden from view, the other lying visible on the carpet. Of the dozen tassels only two were exposed, like a forked tongue. The coiled dressing-gown cord resembled nothing so much as a snake in the corner. Ram Lal understood. The next day he took the train to Belfast to see the Sikh.

Ranjit Singh was also a medical student, but he was more fortunate. His parents were rich and sent him a handsome allowance. He received Ram Lal in his well furnished room at the hostel.

"I have received word from home," said Ram Lal. "My father is dying."

"I am sorry," said Ranjit Singh, "you have my sympathies."

"He asks to see me. I am his first born. I should return."

"Of course," said Singh. The first-born son should always be by his father when he dies.

"It is a matter of the air fare," said Ram Lal. "I am working and making good money. But I do not have enough. If you will lend me the balance I will continue working when I return and repay you."

Sikhs are no strangers to moneylending if the interest is right and repayment secure. Ranjit Singh promised to withdraw the money from the back on Monday morning.

That Sunday evening Ram Lal visited Mr. McQueen at his home

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at Groomsport. The contractor was in front of his television set with a can of beer at his elbow. It was his favorite way to spend a Sunday evening. But he turned the sound down as Ram Lal was shown in by his wife.

"It is about my father," said Ram Lal. "He is dying."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, laddie," said McQueen.

"I should go to him. The first-born son should be with his father at this time. It is the custom of our people."

McQueen had a son in Canada whom he had not seen for seven years.

"Aye," he said, "that seems right and proper."

"I have borrowed the money for the air fare," said Ram Lal. "If I went tomorrow I could be back by the end of the week. The point is, Mr. McQueen, I need the job more than ever now; to repay the loan and for my studies next term. If I am back by the weekend, will you keep the job open for me?"

"All right," said the contractor. "I can't pay you for the time you're away. Nor keep the job open for a further week. But if you're back by the weekend, you can go back to work. Same terms, mind."

"Thank you," said Ram, "you are very kind."

He retained his room in Railway View Street but spent the night at his hostel in Belfast. On the Monday morning he accompanied Ranjit Singh to the bank where the Sikh withdrew the necessary money and gave it to the Hindu. Ram took a taxi to Aldergrove airport and the shuttle to London, where he bought an economy-class ticket on the next flight to India. Twenty-four hours later he touched down in the blistering heat of Bombay.

On the Wednesday he found what he sought in the teeming bazaar at Grant Road Bridge. Mr. Chatterjee's tropical Fish and Reptile Emporium was almost deserted when the young student, with his textbook on reptiles under his arm, wandered in. He found the old proprietor sitting near the back of his shop in half darkness, surrounded by his tanks of fish and glass-fronted cases in which his snakes and lizards dozed through the hot day.

Mr. Chatterjee was no stranger to the academic world. He supplied several medical centers with samples for study and dissection, and occasionally filled a lucrative order from abroad. He nodded his white-bearded head knowledgeably as the student explained what he sought.

"Ah yes," said the old Gujerati merchant, "I know the snake. You are in luck. I have one, but a few days arrived from Rajputana."

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He led Ram Lal into his private sanctum and the two men stared silently through the glass of the snake's new home.

Echis carinatus, said the textbook, but of course the book had been written by an Englishman, who had used the Latin nomenclature. In English, the saw-scaled viper, smallest and deadliest of all his lethal breed.

Wide distribution, said the textbook, being found from West Africa eastwards and northwards to Iran, and on to India and Pakistan. Very adaptable, able to acclimatize to almost any environment, from the moist bush of Western Africa to the cold hills of Iran in winter to the baking hills of India.

Something stirred beneath the leaves in the box.

In size, said the textbook, between 9 and 31 inches long and very slim. Olive-brown in color with a few paler spots, sometimes hardly distinguishable, and a faint undulating darker line down the side of the body. Nocturnal in dry, hot weather, seeking cover during the heat of the day.

The leaves in the box rustled again and a tiny head appeared. Exceptionally dangerous to handle, said the textbook, causing more deaths than even the more famous cobra, largely because of its size, which makes it so easy to touch unwittingly with hand or foot. The author of the book had added a footnote to the effect that the small but lethal snake mentioned by Kipling in his marvellous story "Rikki-Tikki-Tavy" was almost certainly not the Krait, which is about 2 feet long, but more probably the saw-scaled viper. The author was obviously pleased to have caught out the great Kipling in a matter of accuracy.

In the box, a little black forked tongue flickered towards the two Indians beyond the glass.

Very alert and irritable, the long-gone English naturalist had concluded his chapter on *Echis carinatus.* Strikes quickly without warning. The fangs are so small they make a virtually unnoticeable puncture, like two tiny thorns. There is no pain, but death is almost inevitable, usually taking between two and four hours, depending on the body weight of the victim and the level of his physical exertions at the time and afterwards. Cause of death is invariably a brain hemorrhage.

"How much do you want for him?" whispered Ram Lal.

The old Gujerati spread his hands helplessly. "Such a prime specimen," he said regretfully, "and so hard to come by. Five hundred rupees."

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Ram Lal clinched the deal at 350 rupees and took the snake away in a jar.

For his journey back to London, Ram Lal purchased a box of cigars, which he emptied of their contents and in whose lid he punctured twenty small holes for air. The tiny viper, he knew, would need no food for a week and no water for two or three days. It could breathe on an infinitesimal supply of air, so he wrapped the cigar box, resealed and with the viper inside it among his leaves, in several towels whose thick sponginess would contain enough air even inside a suitcase.

He had arrived with a handgrip, but he bought a cheap fiber suitcase and packed it with clothes from market stalls, the cigar box going in the center. It was only minutes before he left his hotel for Bombay airport that he closed and locked the case. For the flight back to London he checked the suitcase into the hold of the Boeing airliner. His hand baggage was searched, but it contained nothing of interest.

The Air India jet landed at London Heathrow on Friday morning and Ram Lal joined the long queue of Indians trying to get into Britain. He was able to prove he was a medical student and not an immigrant, and was allowed through quite quickly. He even reached the luggage carousel as the first suitcases were tumbling onto it, and saw his own in the first two dozen. He took it to the toilet, where he extracted the cigar box and put it in his handgrip.

In the Nothing-to-Declare channel he was stopped all the same, but it was his suitcase that was ransacked. The customs officer glanced in his shoulder bag and let him pass. Ram Lal crossed Heathrow by courtesy bus to Number One Building and caught the midday shuttle to Belfast. He was in Bangor by teatime and able at last to examine his import.

He took a sheet of glass from the bedside table and slipped it carefully between the lid of the cigar box and its deadly contents before opening wide. Through the glass he saw the viper going round and round inside. It paused and stared with angry black eyes back at him. He pulled the lid shut, withdrawing the pane of glass quickly as the boxtop came down.

"Sleep, little friend," he said, "if your breed ever sleep. In the morning you will do Shakti's bidding for her."

Before dark he bought a small screw-top jar of coffee and poured the contents into a china pot in his room. In the morning, using his

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heavy gloves, he transferred the viper from the box to the jar. The enraged snake bit his glove once, but he did not mind. It would have recovered its venom by midday. For a moment he studied the snake, coiled and cramped inside the glass coffee jar, before giving the top a last, hard twist and placing it in his lunchbox. Then he went to catch the works truck.

Big Billie Cameron had a habit of taking off his jacket the moment he arrived at the work site and hanging it on a convenient nail or twig. During the lunch break, as Ram Lal had observed, the giant foreman never failed to go to his jacket after eating, and from the right-hand pocket extract his pipe and tobacco pouch. The routine did not vary. After a satisfying pipe, he would knock out the dottle, rise, and say, "Right, lads, back to work," as he dropped his pipe back into the pocket of his jacket. By the time he turned round everyone had to be on their feet.

Ram Lal's plan was simple but foolproof. During the morning he would slip the snake into the right-hand pocket of the hanging jacket. After his sandwiches, the bullying Cameron would rise from the fire, go to his jacket, and plunge his hand into the pocket. The snake would do what great Shakti had ordered that he be brought halfway across the world to do. It would be he, the viper, not Ram Lal, who would be the Ulsterman's executioner.

Cameron would withdraw his hand with an oath from the pocket, the viper hanging from his finger, its fangs deep in the flesh. Ram Lal would leap up, tear the snake away, throw it to the ground, and stamp upon its head. It would by then be harmless, its venom expended. Finally, with a gesture of disgust, he, Ram Lal, would hurl the dead viper far into the River Comber, which would carry all evidence away to the sea. There might be suspicion, but that was all there would ever be.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, on the excuse of fetching a fresh sledgehammer, Harkishan Ram Lal opened his lunchbox, took out the coffee jar, unscrewed the lid, and shook the contents into the right-hand pocket of the hanging jacket. Within sixty seconds he was back at his work, his act unnoticed.

During lunch he found it hard to eat. The men sat as usual in a circle round the fire; the dry old timber balks crackled and spat, the billycan bubbled above them. The men joshed and joked as ever, while Big Billie munched his way through the pile of doorstep sandwiches his wife had prepared for him. Ram Lal had made a point

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of choosing a place in the circle near to the jacket. He forced himself to eat. In his chest his heart was pounding and the tension in him rose steadily.

Finally Big Billie crumpled the paper of his eaten sandwiches, threw it in the fire, and belched. He rose with a grunt and walked towards his jacket. Ram Lal turned his head to watch. The other men took no notice. Billie Cameron reached his jacket and plunged his hand into the right-hand pocket. Ram Lal held his breath. Cameron's hand rummaged for several seconds and then withdrew his pipe and pouch. He began to fill the bowl with fresh tobacco. As he did so, he caught Ram Lal staring at him.

"What are youse looking at?" he demanded belligerently.

"Nothing," said Ram Lal, and turned to face the fire. But he could not stay still. He rose and stretched, contriving to half turn as he did so. From the corner of his eye he saw Cameron replace the pouch in the pocket and again withdraw his hand with a box of matches in it. The foreman lit his pipe and pulled contentedly. He strolled back to the fire.

Ram Lal resumed his seat and stared at the flames in disbelief. Why, he asked himself, why had great Shakti done this to him? The snake had been her tool, her instrument brought at her command. But she had held it back, refused to use her own implement of retribution. He turned and sneaked another glance at the jacket. Deep down in the lining at the very hem, on the extreme left-hand side, something stirred and was still. Ram Lal closed his eyes in shock. A hole, a tiny hole in the lining, had undone all his planning. He worked the rest of the afternoon in a daze of indecision and worry.

On the truck ride back to Bangor, Big Billie Cameron sat up front as usual, but in view of the heat folded his jacket and put it on his knees. In front of the station, Ram Lal saw him throw the still-folded jacket onto the back seat of his car and drive away. Ram Lal caught up with Tommy Burns as the little man waited for his bus.

"Tell me," he asked, "does Mr. Cameron have a family?"

"Sure," said the little laborer innocently, "a wife and two children."

"Does he live far from here?" said Ram Lal. "I mean, he drives a car."

"Not far," said Burns, "up on the Kilcooley estate. Ganaway Gardens, I think. Going visiting are you?"

"No, no," said Ram Lal, "see you Monday."

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Back in his room, Ram Lal stared at the impassive image of the goddess of justice.

"I did not mean to bring death to his wife and children," he told her. "They have done nothing to me."

The goddess from far away stared back and gave no reply.

Harkishan Ram Lal spent the rest of the weekend in an agony of anxiety. That evening he walked to the Kilcooley housing estate on the ring road and found Ganaway Gardens. It lay just off Owenroe Gardens and opposite Woburn Walk. At the corner of Woburn Walk there was a telephone kiosk, and here he waited for an hour, pretending to make a call, while he watched the short street across the road. He thought he spotted Big Billie Cameron at one of the windows and noted the house.

He saw a teenage girl come out of it and walk away to join some friends. For a moment he was tempted to accost her and tell her what demon slept inside her father's jacket, but he dared not.

Shortly before dusk a woman came out of the house carrying a shopping basket. He followed her down to the Clandeboye shopping center, which was open late for those who took their wage packets on a Saturday. The woman he thought to be Mrs. Cameron entered Stewarts supermarket and the Indian student trailed round the shelves behind her, trying to pluck up the courage to approach her and reveal the danger in her house. Again his nerve failed him. He might, after all, have the wrong woman, even be mistaken about the house. In that case they would take him away as a madman.

He slept ill that night, his mind racked by visions of the saw-scaled viper coming out of its hiding place in the jacket lining to slither, silent and deadly, through the sleeping council house.

On the Sunday he again haunted the Kilcooley estate, and firmly identified the house of the Cameron family. He saw Big Billie clearly in the back garden. By mid-afternoon he was attracting attention locally and knew he must either walk boldly up to the front door and admit what he had done or depart and leave all in the hands of the goddess. The thought of facing the terrible Cameron with the news of what deadly danger had been brought so close to his children was too much. He walked back to Railway View Street.

On Monday morning the Cameron family rose at a quarter to six, a bright and sunny August morning. By six, the four of them were at breakfast in the tiny kitchen at the back of the house, the son, daughter, and wife in their dressing gowns, Big Billie dressed for

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work. His jacket was where it had spent the weekend, in a closet in the hallway.

Just after six, his daughter Jenny rose, stuffing a piece of marmaladed toast into her mouth.

"I'm away to wash," she said.

"Before ye go, girl, get my jacket from the press," said her father, working his way through a plate of cereal. The girl reappeared a few seconds later with the jacket, held by the collar. She proffered it to her father. He hardly looked up.

"Hang it behind the door," he said. The girl did as she was bid, but the jacket had no hanging tab and the hook was no rusty nail but a smooth chrome affair. The jacket hung for a moment, then fell to the kitchen floor. Her father looked up as she left the room.

"Jenny," he shouted, "pick the damn thing up."

No one in the Cameron household argued with the head of the family. Jenny came back, picked up the jacket, and hung it more firmly. As she did, something thin and dark slipped from its folds and slithered into the corner with a dry rustle across the linoleum. She stared at it in horror.

"Dad, what's that in your jacket?"

Big Billie Cameron paused, a spoonful of cereal halfway to his mouth. Mrs. Cameron turned from the cooker. Fourteen-year-old Bobby ceased buttering a piece of toast and stared. The small creature lay curled in the corner by the row of cabinets, tight-bunched, defensive, glaring back at the world, tiny tongue flickering fast.

"Lord save us, it's a snake," said Mrs. Cameron.

"Don't be a bloody fool, woman. Don't you know there are no snakes in Ireland? Everyone knows that," said her husband. He put down the spoon. "What is it, Bobby?"

Though a tyrant inside and outside his house, Big Billie had a grudging respect for the knowledge of his young son, who was good at school and was being taught many strange things. The boy stared at the snake through his owlish glasses.

"It must be a slowworm, Dad," he said. "They had some at school last term for the Biology class. Brought them in for dissection. From across the water."

"It doesn't look like a worm to me," said his father.

"It isn't really a worm," said Bobby. "It's a lizard with no legs."

"Then why do they call it a worm?" asked his truculent father.

"I don't know," said Bobby.

"Then what the hell are you going to school for?"

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"Will it bite?" asked Mrs. Cameron fearfully.

"Not at all," said Bobby. "It's harmless."

"Kill it," said Cameron senior, "and throw it in the dustbin."

His son rose from the table and removed one of his slippers, which he held like a flyswat in one hand. He was advancing, bare-ankled, towards the corner, when his father changed his mind. Big Billie looked up from his plate with a gleeful smile.

"Hold on a minute, just hold on there, Bobby," he said. "I have an idea. Woman, get me a jar."

"What kind of a jar?" said Mrs. Cameron.

"How should I know what kind of a jar? A jar with a lid on it."

Mrs. Cameron sighed, skirted the snake, and opened a cupboard. She examined her store of jars.

"There's a jamjar with dried peas in it," she said.

"Put the peas somewhere else and give me the jar," commanded Cameron. She passed him the jar.

"What are you going to do, Dad?" asked Bobby.

"There's a darkie we have to work. A heathen man. He comes from a land with a lot of snakes in it. I have in mind to have some fun with him. A wee joke, like. Pass me that oven glove, Jenny."

"You'll not need a glove," said Bobby. "He can't bite you."

"I'm not touching the dirty thing," said Cameron.

"He's not dirty," said Bobby. "They're very clean creatures."

"You're a fool, boy, for all your school learning. Does the Good Book not say: On thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat . . . ? Aye, and more than dust, no doubt. I'll not touch him with me hand."

Jenny passed her father the oven glove. Open jamjar in his left hand, right hand protected by the glove, Big Billie Cameron stood over the viper. Slowly his right hand descended. When it dropped, it was fast; but the small snake was faster. Its tiny fangs went halmlessly into the padding of the glove at the center of the palm. Cameron did not notice, for the act was masked from his view by his own hands. In a trice the snake was inside the jamjar and the lid was on. Through the glass they watched it wriggle furiously.

"I hate them, harmless or not," said Mrs. Cameron. "I'll thank you to get it out of the house."

"I'll be doing that right now," said her husband, "for I'm late as it is."

He slipped the jamjar into his shoulder bag, already containing his lunchbox, stuffed his pipe and pouch into the right-hand pocket

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of his jacket, and took both out to the car. He arrived at the station yard five minutes late and was surprised to find the Indian student staring at him fixedly.

I suppose he wouldn't have the second sight, thought Big Billie as they trundled south to Newtownards and Comber.

By mid-morning all the gang had been let into Big Billie's secret joke on pain of a thumping if they let on to "the darkie." There was no chance of that; assured that the slowworm was perfectly harmless, they too thought it a good leg-pull. Only Ram Lal worked on in ignorance, consumed by his private thoughts and worries.

At the lunch break he should have suspected something. The tension was palpable. The men sat in a circle around the fire as usual, but the conversation was stilted and had he not been so preoccupied he would have noticed the half concealed grins and the looks darted in his direction. He did not notice. He placed his own lunchbox between his knees and opened it. Coiled between the sandwiches and the apple, head back to strike, was the viper.

The Indian's scream echoed across the clearing, just ahead of the roar of laughter from the laborer. Simultaneously with the scream, the lunchbox flew high in the air as he threw it away from himself with all his strength. All the contents of the box flew in a score of directions, landing in the long grass, the broom and gorse all around them.

Ram Lal was on his feet, shouting. The gangers rolled helplessly in their mirth, Big Billie most of all. He had not had such a laugh in months.

"It's a snake," screamed Ram Lal, "a poisonous snake. Get out of here, all of you. It's deadly."

The laughter redoubled; the men could not contain themselves. The reaction of the joke's victim surpassed all their expectations.

"Please, believe me. It's a snake, a deadly snake."

Big Billie's face was suffused. He wiped the tears from his eyes, seated across the clearing from Ram Lal, who was standing looking wildly round.

"You ignorant darkie," he gasped, "don't you know? There are no snakes in Ireland. Understand? There aren't any."

His sides ached with laughing and he leaned back in the grass, his hands behind him to support him. He failed to notice the two pricks, like tiny thorns, that went into the vein on the inside of the right wrist.

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The joke was over and the hungry men tucked into their lunches. Harkishan Ram Lal reluctantly took his seat, constantly glancing round him, a mug of steaming tea held ready, eating only with his left hand, staying clear of the long grass. After lunch they returned to work. The old distillery was almost down, the mountains of rubble and savable timbers lying dusty under the August sun.

At half past three Big Billie Cameron stood up from his work, rested on his pick and passed a hand across his forehead. He licked at a slight swelling on the inside of his wrist, then started work again. Five minutes later he straightened up again.

"I'm not feeling so good," he told Patterson, who was next to him. "I'm going to take a spell in the shade."

He sat under a tree for a while and then held his head in his hands. At a quarter past four, still clutching his splitting head, he gave one convulsion and toppled sideways. It was several minutes before Tommy Burns noticed him. He walked across and called to Patterson.

"Big Billie's sick," he called. "He won't answer me."

The gang broke and came over to the tree in whose shade the foreman lay. His sightless eyes were staring at the grass a few inches from his face. Patterson bent over him. He had been long enough in the laboring business to have seen a few dead ones.

"Ram," he said, "you have medical training. What do you think?"

Ram Lal did not need to make an examination, but he did. When he straightened up he said nothing, but Patterson understood.

"Stay here all of you," he said, taking command. "I'm going to phone an ambulance and call McQueen." He set off down the track to the main road.

The ambulance got there fast, half an hour later. It reversed down the track and two men heaved Cameron onto a stretcher. They took him away to Newtownards General Hospital, which had the nearest casualty unit, and there the foreman was logged in as DOA—dead on arrival. An extremely worried McQueen arrived thirty minutes after that.

Because of the unknown circumstance of the death an autopsy had to be performed and it was, by the North Down area pathologist, in the Newtownards municipal mortuary to which the body had been transferred. That was on the Tuesday. By that evening the pathologist's report was on its way to the office of the coroner for North Down, in Belfast.

The report said nothing extraordinary. The deceased had been a

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man of forty-one years, big-built and immensely strong. There were upon the body various minor cuts and abrasions, mainly on the hands and wrists, quite consistent with the job of navvy, and none of these were in any way associated with the cause of death. The latter, beyond a doubt, had been a massive brain hemorrhage, itself probably caused by extreme exertion in conditions of great heat.

Possessed of this report, the coroner would normally not hold an inquest, being able to issue a certificate of death by natural causes to the registrar at Bangor. But there was something Harkishan Ram Lal did not know.

Big Billie Cameron had been a leading member of the Bangor council of the outlawed Ulster Volunteer Force, the hard-line Protestant paramilitary organization. The computer at Lurgan, into which all deaths in the province of Ulster, however innocent, are programmed, threw this out and someone in Lurgan picked up the phone to call the Royal Ulster Constabulary at Castlereagh.

Someone there called the coroner's office in Belfast, and a formal inquest was ordered. In Ulster death must not only be accidental; it must be seen to be accidental. For certain people, at least. The inquest was in the Town Hall at Bangor on the Wednesday. It meant a lot of trouble for McQueen, for the Inland Revenue attended. So did two quiet men of extreme loyalist persuasion from the UVF council. They sat at the back. Most of the dead man's workmates sat near the front, a few feet from Mrs. Cameron.

Only Patterson was called to give evidence. He related the events of the Monday, prompted by the coroner, and as there was no dispute none of the other laborers was called, not even Ram Lal. The coroner read the pathologist's report aloud and it was clear enough. When he had finished, he summed up before giving his verdict.

"The pathologist's report is quite unequivocal. We have heard from Mr. Patterson of the events of that lunch break, of the perhaps rather foolish prank played by the deceased upon the Indian student. It would seem that Mr. Cameron was so amused that he laughed himself almost to the verge of apoplexy. The sun did the rest, provoking the rupture of a large blood vessel in the brain or, as the pathologist puts it in more medical language, a cerebral hemorrhage. This court extends its sympathy to the widow and her children, and finds that Mr. William Cameron died of accidental causes."

Outside on the lawns that spread before Bangor Town Hall McQueen talked to his navvies.

"I'll stand fair by you, lads," he said. "The job's still on, but I can't

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afford not to deduct tax and all the rest, not with the Revenue breathing down my neck. The funeral's tomorrow, you can take the day off. Those who want to go on can report on Friday."

Harkishan Ram Lal did not attend the funeral. While it was in progress at the Bangor cemetery he took a taxi back to Comber and asked the driver to wait on the road while he walked down the track. The driver was a Bangor man and had heard about the death of Cameron.

"Going to pay your respects on the spot, are you?" he asked.

"In a way," said Ram Lal.

"That the manner of your people?" asked the driver.

"You could say so," said Ram Lal.

"Aye, well, I'll not say it's any better or worse than our way, by the graveside," said the driver, and prepared to read his paper while he waited.

Harkishan Ram Lal walked down the track to the clearing and stood where the campfire had been. He looked around at the long grass, the broom and the gorse in its sandy soil.

"*Visha serp,*" he called out to the hidden viper. "O venomous snake, can you hear me? You have done what I brought you so far from the hills of Rajputana to achieve. But you were supposed to die. I should have killed you myself, had it all gone as I planned, and thrown your foul carcass in the river.

"Are you listening, deadly one? Then hear this. You may live a little longer but then you will die, as all things die. And you will die alone, without a female with which to mate, because there are no snakes in Ireland."

The saw-scaled viper did not hear him, or if it did, gave no hint of understanding. Deep in its hole in the warm sand beneath him, it was busy, totally absorbed in doing what nature commanded it must do.

At the base of a snake's tail are two overlapping plate-scales which obscure the chloaca. The viper's tail was erect, the body throbbed in ancient rhythm. The plates were parted, and from the chloaca, one by one, each an inch long in its transparent sac, each as deadly at birth as its parent, she was bringing her dozen babies into the world.

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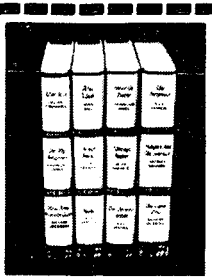

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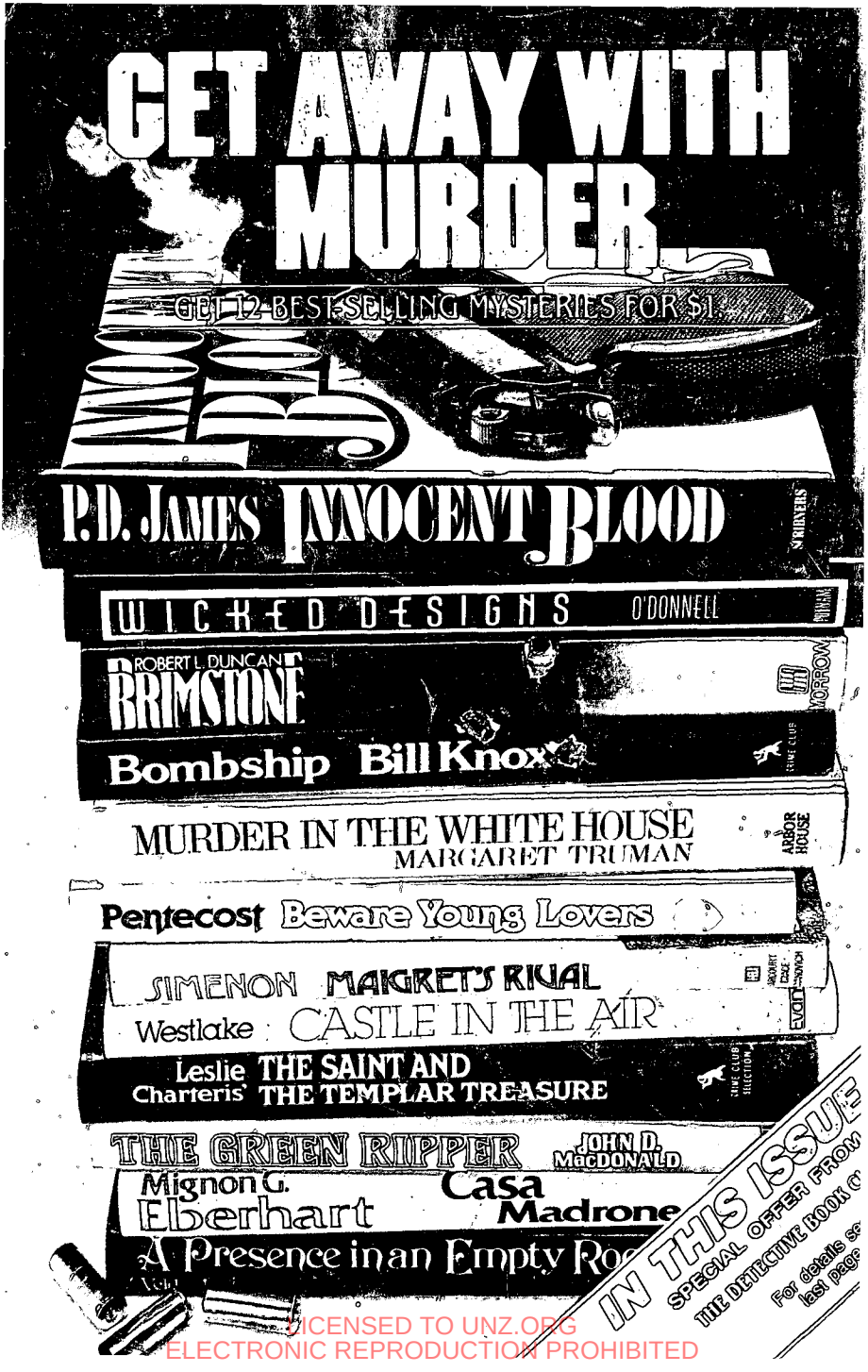
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